PhD Thesis

Glimmering Realities, Hidden Objects
Rethinking a formalist critique of the art object through new materialism

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I, Ginny Elston, declare that the enclosed submission for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and consisting of a written thesis and portfolio meet the regulations stated in the handbook for the mode of submission selected and approved by the Research Degrees Sub-Committee.

I declare that this submission is my own work and has not been submitted for any other academic award.

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Abstract

The turn towards matter and materials in contemporary philosophy presents the artist with many exciting possibilities as well as paradoxes. Amongst broad and varying new materialist perspectives, a recurring theme of reconsidering the agency of art objects continues to arise in the Humanities. What do these ideas really mean for a visual artist who subjectively builds material objects, whose art is apprehended and encountered by humans, who in turn engender their own meaning from these things? This project situates itself within a context of process-led research that critically examines the notion of agency and what value it holds in relation to an artist's practice. The thesis argues that a resurgence of formalist values can provide an account for the aesthetic dimension of things that a new materialist perspective currently lacks.

KEY WORDS

New materialism, formalism, subject-object relations, OOO, Michael Fried, Jane Bennett, practice-based inquiry, assemblage, contemporary sculpture, the found object, painting

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Introduction

0.1 Context and rationale for the thesis

'Practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated. We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming.'[1]

In her 2007 book *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning,* Karen Barad speaks of the division between ontology and epistemology as being a remnant of an antiquated and limited idea of metaphysics. This division continues to insist on the differences between human/ nonhuman, subject/ object, mind/ body, and perhaps most importantly for artists, matter/ discourse. When we assume that matter is mute and inert, and that only discourse provides ideas, words and intellect through a socially constructivist model of meaning-making, we reduce our capacity for accessing knowledge through open-ended means. Central to re-examining these relations between subject and object, exploring the life of matter, and rethinking the notion of agency are a branch of writers, philosophers, artists, social anthropologists and scientists who have been grouped together under the umbrella term 'new materialists'. Some of its leading proponents include political theorist Jane Bennett, ecologist Timothy Morton, philosopher Graham Harman and writer Donna Haraway. Collectively their work spans across four decades from the early 1990s to the early 2020s, though its roots can be traced through materialist lineages of Epicurus – Spinoza – Diderot – Deleuze. Though new materialism covers a diverse range of social, ethical, environmental, and philosophical discourses, the importance to which it assigns matter and materiality makes it particularly relevant to artists.

Reconsidering the nature and agency of matter and re-evaluating the role that humans play within a material world provides an interesting set of challenges to a maker. The term agency itself is a term that Professor of Political and Social Theory Diana Coole notes 'seems to have fallen into both theoretical and historical crisis'[2]. Despite the increasing popularity of this subject within the discourse, there is as much doubt about the very basics of its conception as there are those endorsing it with radical urgency. When we reconsider who, what, and how actors experience agency, our world view expands to encompass a much more integrated, dynamic and flowing exchange between agents. We may realise that we simultaneously have more impact

[1] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Half-way*: *Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007) p.185

[2] Diana Coole, 'Rethinking Agency: A Phenomenological Approach to Embodiment and Agentic Capacities', *Political Studies,* 53 (2003) pp.124 – 142 (p.124)

on and less significance in the world than previously thought. Defamiliarising and reassessing the origins, locations and manifestations of agency has radical political implications, as Coole asserts:

> 'It is also necessary to emphasise the sheer fact of agents' embodiment and its political significance here. The body situates them in space and time and thus underlines the particular, passionate and perspectival nature of all claims. It also entails exteriority: having an outside whose intersubjective significance eludes conscious control while locating actors within a field of forces where intentions achieve efficacy through action and acts feed into the unintended consequences of collective life. It is bodies, finally, that remind agents of their own and others' frailty; their vulnerability to suffering and pain; the high stakes of political conflict […] It reminds all actors of their mortality.'[3]

Meanwhile Matthew Rampley, research Fellow at the Institute of Art History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague, notes the lack of conceptual analysis of agency and affect in the arts, despite their increased popularity, suggesting that '[a]dvocates of expanded notions of agency fail to offer an alternative theory of agency. They merely seek to extend the range of objects that can be considered to be agents.'[4] Through vibrant debate and discussion, the concept of agency throws up questions about hierarchical subject and object relations, providing additional perspectives on our current ecological and climate crisis. So how does a new materialist perspective of the object frame this thesis? It is important to acknowledge the structures we use in order to tell stories, make connections, rethink situations, and therefore create new knowledge. Science Fiction/ Speculative Fabulation/ Speculative Fiction/ Science Facts/ String Figures… all of these are different and yet interconnected frameworks of identifying patterns, paradigms, organisations, and assemblages to help us understand, connect, and make sense of the world around us. Another thinker who falls under the new materialist umbrella, Levi R. Bryant, uses Claude Lévi-Strauss' idea of the *bricoleur* as a builder who freely constructs a world by pulling things/ ideas / narratives together as well as breaking things apart, with whatever ideologies are at hand[5]. This thesis has been constructed in such a fashion, by drawing on a variety of different ideas within contemporary philosophy, historical art movements and personal studio practice, as well as the work of a variety of artists, ranging from the Abstract Expressionists of the 1950s and 1960s to contemporary artists working today.

[3] Coole, Rethinking Agency, pp. 129 - 130

[4] Matthew Rampley, quoting Michael Podro, 'Agency, affect and intention in art history: some observations' *The Journal of Art Historiography,* 24 (2021) pp. 1- 21 (p.19)

[5] Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (University of Michigan: Ann Arbor, 2011) p.27

This PhD project began as an investigation into the connections between new materialism and a formalist critique of the art object. In this project, 'formalism' denotes the manner of reading an artwork which prioritises the 'formal' qualities of the work itself. This means a focus on the qualities derived through sensually perceiving the object itself rather than on concepts arising through the relations to external factors. Formalism characterised one aspect of Modernist art criticism in the mid-twentieth century, with one of its lead proponents, Michael Fried, aiming to establish a criterion of 'convincing discriminations of value'[6] of artworks. Reading such a statement today seems at best outdated, at worst an indication of an exclusionary value system created by a privileged minority according to their own personal whims. Michael Schreyach, Professor of Art History and specialist in 20th century modernism, identifies the limitations of such a stringent critique to abstract expressionist painters in particular: 'Unable to acknowledge its entrenched assumptions and dogmatic protocols, formalism appeared by 1960 to have become a regulative, strictly codified set of technical procedures built upon a teleological view of artistic development'[7]. Not only did a formalist critique represent an elite form of cultural gatekeeping in terms paying homage to a few favoured white, male artists, it also rejected the significance of the social and political dimensions of everyday life which were intrinsic to the nature and meaning of art being made at the time. Even Fried himself acknowledged in 1998 that his previous beliefs about the uniqueness of a formal lens to assert such judgements, which dismissed the notion of audience subjectivity, were an outmoded and unhelpful approach to art criticism. However, contemporary engagement with formalism need not replicate its historical exclusivity. What are we losing in dismissing this way of reading an artwork? What if, as philosopher Graham Harman asserts, formalism was 'simply denounced and abandoned, rather than assimilated and overcome'[8]? Could a resurgence of a formalist reading of an artwork help us to access the artwork in and of itself, rather than its relations to external, geo-socio-political relations to humans? This thesis attempts to explore this proposition.

This project focuses on the formalist critique of Michael Fried's 1967 essay, *Art and Objecthood*. Today, it is not only Fried's proponent of modernist principles in his essay that might seem antiquated. Even the Minimalist counterparts in the essay represented by Robert Morris and Donald Judd, whilst still of interest nowadays, also seem distant to artists working in today's cultural landscapes. With the benefit of historical distance, art critic Hal Foster described the essay's disparaging critique of Minimalism as 'distinctly puritanical'[9] in 1996, whilst in 2002 art historian and curator Miwon Kwon noted how Fried's dismissal of so-called 'theatrical' works of art in fact inadvertently highlighted the radical break between self-contained and isolated

[6] Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) p.18
[7] Michael Schreyach, Introductory Note for 'Conference on the Goals and Limitations of Formalism,' *ArtHist,* 3rd November 2014, p.1 https://arthist.net/archive/8823/view=pdf [accessed 24/01/23]
[8] Graham Harman, *Art + Objects* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020) p.2.
[9] Hal Foster, *Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996) p.52

modernist sculpture and sculpture which relied on spatial and temporal forces outside of itself[10]. Notable too is the lack of any women painters and sculptors in the essay, such as Lynda Benglis, Howardena Pindell, Eva Hesse and Bridget Riley, whose work often directly contradicted a formalist agenda, specifically challenging the boundaries of medium and material experimentation though hybridity, narrative and political engagement. Though the essay's omission of these voices may have made sense in terms of wanting to specifically highlight and focus on artist's work according to Fried's formalist criteria, their exclusion from the wider discussion of developments of the late modernist/ early postmodernist era reflects the exclusivity of the male-dominated arenas of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism at the time, and is indicative of the systematic failure on behalf of modernist critics to widen the pool of artists they were critiquing. Other voices providing a critique of formalism in its different modes also existed in the late modernist/ postmodernist era, such Rosalind Krauss and Linda Nochlin, and their thoughts provide a counterbalance to Fried's analysis throughout the thesis. By the late 1960's however, Krauss and Nochlin too were diverging from the 'rigid prescriptions of Greenbergian formalism' in formalist critique that the writers had initially been influenced by[11]. Both their art criticism began to push back on this rigidity by developing a critique that responded to the current cultural and political events at the time[12], and so moved into a more progressive line of critique that led into postmodernism.

It is despite, and maybe even because of these drawbacks, the essay also now marks a significant moment in art history when modernist art criticism began to be superseded by its postmodernist counterparts. The essay represents a last bastion of defending modernist principles of art, namely Clement Greenberg's medium specificity and the autonomous nature of the art object. Fried sets up these aspects in contrast to Minimalist sculpture which he deems 'theatrical' and beholden to the audience. In this essay, he explores the relation between beholder and the artwork itself, on its own terms and according to the artwork's own parameters, rather than explaining the artwork in relation to socio-geo-politico-historic relations. It is therefore partly due to this rigour, or severity, in Fried's critique that determined *Art and Objecthood* to be the tool by which to examine correlations to new materialism, since it presents us with an unabashed and unadulterated formalist critique of the art object. Despite the different lenses formalism and new materialism offer as readers of a cultural artefact, and despite the difference in time periods of these two

[10] 'The art object or event in this context was to be singularly and multiply experienced in the here and now through the bodily presence of each viewing subject, in a sensory immediacy of spatial extension and temporal duration (what Michael Fried derisively characterized as theatricality) (*Art and Objecthood, p. 116 – 147)* rather than instantaneously perceived in a visual epiphany by a disembodied eye.' Miwon Kwon, One Place after Another (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002) p. 11

[11] Michael Lobel, 'Remembering Linda Nochlin', (2018) paragraph 23 https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/remembering-linda-nochlin-63363/ [accessed 04/02/24]

[12] Virginia B. Spivey, Review of 'Rosalind Krauss and American Philosophical Art Criticism: From Formalism to Beyond Postmodernism' by David Carrier, (2004) paragraph 3, http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/614 [accessed 04/02/24]

discourses, the research for this project identified a common theme: exploring the agency and autonomy of an artwork. This thesis argues that a re-interpretation of a formalist critique provides additional layers of understanding to a new materialist perspective on the arts.

This thesis also posits that a simplistic rereading of *Art and Objecthood*, positioning the essay as a historical text that promotes a simplistic binary between modern and post-modern, effectively fuels a polemical division between modernism and post-modernism and a superficial differentiation between absorption and theatricality. Elements such as relationship to the body, the space around the work and even the passages of time are still clearly applicable to the modernist artworks Fried speaks of, for example how we experience Anthony Caro's *Yellow Swing* (fig. 4) will differ from morning to afternoon to night, depending on how the sculpture is positioned in the room. Meanwhile, the objects curated by Robert Morris in a gallery space (fig. 10) can still be understood as discreet objects, autonomous and separate from us even as we navigate our way around and through them. That artworks could ever truly be considered 'autonomous', entirely self-sufficient or self-involved is also questionable – Fried himself in his reflections upon his art criticism states:

> '[…] many readers have also assumed that my critical and art-historical writings form a seamless whole. But that assumption is wrong in several aspects. For one thing, it ignores my insistence, spelled out in *Courbet's Realism* and implicit in *Absorption and Theatricality*, on the futility of trying to determine whether or not a given painting conclusively succeeded or for that matter conclusively failed in overcoming the conditions I have been calling theater.'[13]

Through a series of practice-based explorations in the studio, this project aims to elucidate how a formalist critique, inspired by Fried's reading of the work of certain 20th century artists, provides a way of deepening the new materialist drive to rethink the agency of art objects. By not relating the artworks to their socio-geo-politico-economic circumstances, Fried's readings of late modernist paintings and sculptures make us more aware of the objects on their own terms, therefore providing us with a strategy for accounting for the human maker within a new materialist framework. To be clear, this is not a project which seeks to further the form-content debate. This is also not a project which seeks to champion a formalist reading of the artwork whilst denigrating its relations and context. What it does seek to do is reveal how a formalist critique of the artwork can further a new materialist perspective on the agency of matter. This project aims to bring to light certain formalist approaches to reading artworks which may have been overlooked or neglected, and examine whether they can build on our understanding of agency in relation to art objects.

[13] Fried, p.49

0.2 Research questions

Barbara Bolt and Estelle Barrett's 2013 *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' Through the Arts*[14] provides the researcher with an understanding of how an artwork itself can be the locus for re-examining object-subject relations. Likewise, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost's 2010 *New Materialism: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*[15] provides the reader with a central grounding in new materialist theory in relation to autonomy and agency. Nevertheless, in his review of Coole and Frost's compendium, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Amherst College Andrew Poe points out several limitations of new materialist thought which are central to this project. He addresses the often indeterminate and negatory aspects of a new materialist philosophy, which 'builds in an emptiness to politics that seem to speak against the very act of problematization that materialism depends on'[16], whilst also questioning the implications of extending agency beyond human actants. His second point, however, is the most prevalent for this research project, and is in the form of two questions:

> 'It is unclear yet and how neo-materialists regard the question of whether there remains an aesthetic dimension to 'things' – meaning that we, as those who perceive the aesthetic, are thereby always doing work on the world, even without laboring on it? Another way of asking this is whether the work of art may prove a necessary limiting factor to the materiality thesis, even in its own materiality?'[17]

This research project intends to unpick these two questions by drawing a connection between a formalist critique of the artwork and a desire to not reduce the artwork down into component, human-oriented parts. It is noteworthy that in her critique of Poe's article, Barbara Bolt fails to acknowledge the all-important question mark at the end of the first sentence. Poe is raising the question here, not necessarily asserting that humans are always doing 'work on the world, even without laboring on it.' Her subsequent claim that Poe 'reinforces a particular view of art that sees humans as the active creator in the creation of things'[18] fails to encompass the generous yet critical stance of Poe's writing on the complications of humans embroiled in materiality throughout the text. It is undeniable that we as humans, and we as human makers in particular, are 'those who perceive the aesthetic experience' as Poe describes, in the

[14] Estelle Barrett & Barbara Bolt (Eds.) *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' through the arts* (London/ New York: I.B Tauris, 2013)
[15] Coole, D. & Frost, S. (Eds.) *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010)
[16] Andrew Poe, 'Review Essay: Things-Beyond-Objects', *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* (XIX) 1 (2011) pp. 153-164 (p.161)
[17] Ibid.
[18] Barbara Bolt, 'Introduction: Toward a 'New Materialism' through the Arts', in Barrett & Bolt, p.5

sense that we can only know of our own aesthetic experience of anything. It may well be that tigers, rocks and even crisp packets have their own aesthetic experiences, but we will never be able to apprehend them fully, similarly as we will never truly apprehend the aesthetic experience of another human, try as we might to describe it. In the context of this thesis then, the term aesthetic relates to the way in which humans sense, respond to, critique, value and generate sensations from contemplating or beholding works of art. Aspects of beauty and ugliness relate to this within the realm of contemplating works of art, but there is a wider sense of aesthetic experiences that can be applied to the world at large, such as encountering a group of rusting orange pipes tangled in the grass, or finding the patterns, textures, shapes and combinations of materials in rubbish dumps aesthetically pleasing. So how does a new materialist account for the human act of creation? How much 'making' is too much making? How much is required on behalf of the artist to allow the materials to speak for themselves?

There are several paradoxes within this project: trying to see around or beyond a human perspective is always going to be a failing endeavour as we inevitably become stuck within our human parameters. Similarly, we are just as stuck with imposing our 'isms' on to art in a bid to deepen our understanding of things; whether it be formalism or new materialism, we're still just imposing another scaffold onto the sprawling canon of twenty-first century art criticism. Nevertheless, formalism provides a guide to analyse the art object as it presents itself to us. It offers a series of criteria by which to judge the artwork based on principles that are inherent to the artwork itself, not through extraneous relations to circumstances. What if we were to prioritise the analysis of paintings or sculptures, the things, themselves, rather than discussions about how they fit into certain socio-geo-political readings or what concepts they point to? At the heart of the research is an attempt to readdress the balance in acknowledging the formal qualities of works, the very fabric and construction of a work in and of itself, in order to prioritise conversation about the qualities of materials, artworks, and the process of making itself.

0.3 Methodology

> 'There is in this sense no privileged position from which knowledges can be produced, as the researcher is of the world. Researching phenomena, then, is a methodological practice of continuously questioning the effects of the way we research, on the knowledges we produce. This unfolds itself as an ethico-onto-epistemology of knowing in being. Ethics is about being response-able to the way we make the world, and to consider the effects our knowledge-making processes have on the world.'[19]

Heavy, soft, pensive, jangly, hard, optimistic, fibrous, degradable, fragile, eternal, spongy, ephemeral, wet, shining, sticky, remote, blobby, bobbly, dusty, scratchy, hopeless, cushioned ... In order to stay with the trouble, as Donna Haraway calls us to do, we must bed down with our fellow kin, in all its varying earthy, mechanical, beautiful and hideous shapes and forms. We are asked to not run from them or imagine a better future. A new materialist perspective asks us to reconsider our material relationships as more horizontal rather than hierarchical. In so doing we realise our inextricable interconnectivity, our kinship with what we have done, what we have made, what we have broken, and what we can repair. But is it possible to view these relationships as horizontal when we have an inherent subjectivity that enables our creative practices as human makers? The controversial relations between subject and object thus arise again in relation to art, and necessitates a re-examination of if, where, how and why the power and autonomy of the object exists. This practice led research project thus argues that a resurgence of formalist values can provide an additional dimension to a new materialist perspective of the artwork.

Creating an integrated, synthesized and symbiotic relationship between the theoretical and practical components of research proves difficult. Working in the studio as a maker whilst trying to decode, analyse and drive forward a written argument alongside it leads to a messy and complex place of investigation. Clearly space is needed to make when in 'making' mode, and reflection and creative time is also needed when in 'writing' mode. These are the kind of slippages that exist between new materialist perspectives and art making. It was necessary to avoid the trap of simply illustrating formalist principles or new materialist philosophies in action as a way of demonstrating how my own studio work engages with these theoretical concepts. Separating the detailed examinations of these philosophical frameworks in the first three chapters establishes a theoretical foundation for the written thesis, before transitioning to the practical application in my work. The adjoining portfolio to this thesis is therefore included to provide visual documentation of my artistic practice, which will be thoroughly discussed in the final chapter. At the heart of action in the

[19] Barad, p.381

studio is a deep underlying need to recognise the life of material, its artistic value, and its impact and potential agency on its surroundings. How exactly does an exploration of new materialist theory align methodologically with a practice of painting and sculpture? The speculative nature of arts-based research doesn't necessarily lead to an easily identifiable set of answers, and will instead inevitably lead to further questions, which are intended to deepen and develop the lines of inquiry.

Throughout the development of the project, it became clear that alongside a practice of physical material engagement, writing also emerged as a form of artistic practice in itself, as a form of material engagement. Like the physical process of making in the studio, writing too generates form, bringing abstract and intangible concepts into an experiential realm. In this way, writing parallels sculpting or painting, where each word or sentence builds, defines, and enlivens the conceptual structure of the research. It is also subject to the same creativity, rigor, and criticality that apply to sculpture and painting. Writing the thesis has shaped studio thinking, much like how materials shape sculptural forms and painterly processes. Structure, form and rhythm of language also lend formal considerations to ideas, and so writing acts a mode through which to explore materially led discussions and connections to art histories and philosophies.

The written thesis is also where the project's focus on formalism's historical and aesthetic concerns could most clearly connect, inform and rethink new materialism's emphasis on agency and matter. It is through writing that the project was able to mediate between formalist interpretations of art objects, and the agency-focused questions that new materialist philosophies raise for makers. Physical works, as well as the written work, are experimental sites where the formal qualities of languages engage with and respond to the material-discursive possibilities of art objects. Making and writing are dual processes of reflection and creation and are relational by allowing for moments of reflection that connect, diverge and reconnect theory and practice. Rather than a static recording of ideas, writing operates as a dialogic process and has continually reshaped my thoughts on my own work and the works of others. Rather than a detached academic exercise, writing presents itself as an active methodology that allows for the interrogation of both theoretical frameworks (formalism and new materialism) and material practices simultaneously. This approach positions writing as a creative act of synthesis, drawing together abstract thought and embodied practice. Writing has therefore created a space where thoughts, observations, and theories converge, with each iteration of the written text acting as an evolving record of thinking. It has charted how my interpretations and theoretical positions have developed and shifted over time in response to the project's materials and ideas.

The questions driving this project seek to explore this notion of 'agency' in relation to artworks through the eyes of an artist, not an art historian, an art critic nor a philosopher, despite these fields inevitably contributing to the concept of 'artist'. The project presents a response to art historian James Elkin's call for further theorization on how we think through art and how knowledge is embodied in works

of art[20]. This project questions, destabilises and radicalises the terms of human to non-human relations, bringing awareness to the life of objects through material engagement in practice-based research. The project also seeks to gain understanding rather than explanations through shifts in perception. By investigating the physical and phenomenological aspects of materiality through an object-oriented ontological framework, the project elucidates how complex, non-hierarchical relations between inanimate and animate objects and humans may lead to a better understanding of both our places in the world. Through the study of agency in relation to artworks we gain better insight into the nature of objects, and so can begin to reorient ourselves in daily life towards a greater awareness of object, objecthood and subjectivity. Exploring the theoretical implications of agency through a visual arts practice can therefore help to explain ways of thinking that can be embodied in an artifact, and reveal how thought and meaning are transmitted through the visual arts.

Close reading, contextual interpretation, and formal analysis of *Art and Objecthood* provides the grounding on which to explore several key aspects of Fried's formalist criticism. The thesis also draws on writing by Rosalind Krauss, notably her 1977 *Passages of Modern Sculpture*[21] and Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells from* 2012[22] to provide historical and contemporary, direct and indirect critiques of Fried's essay. Meanwhile textual analysis of Isabelle Graw and Hanneke Grootenboer's contributions to the scholarly discussions on paintings and agency in the second chapter of the thesis are complemented by interpretation of several contemporary artists who situate themselves between the fields of painting and sculpture. A close examination and assessment of Alfred Gell's theory of agency and the art object provides a theoretical grounding of agency, albeit not one that is not necessarily aligned with new materialism. For the more urgent considerations of materiality, the project uses reflexive analysis on case studies of artists to begin with, followed by reflections on my own practice as a maker.

[20] James Elkins, '*What is Art Research? And What is the Knowledge that Art Produces?*', recorded Zoom conversation, Glasgow School of Art Friday Lecture Series, <https://canvas.gsa.ac.uk/courses/279/pages/2020-slash-21-friday-event-recordings?module_item_id=84187> [accessed 26/02/2021]

[21] Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977)

[22] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012)

0.4 Contributions to material knowledge today

If we were to take just one of art historian James Elkin's definitions of art research as an 'unusual process'[23], this helps us to understand how the nature of intuitive and improvisatory sequences of works can formulate, explore, experiment, and argue a case. 'Art can have meaning even though it's not a normal linguistic meaning'[24]. Swedish author Per Nilsson articulates the idea that artistic learning and research is not explicitly scientific, but instead is a form of knowledge; 'an 'amphibian' discipline in a littoral landscape, which occupies or traverses the liminal space between plural disciplinary formatives, discursively constituted'[25]. It is important therefore that this project is understood as practice-based research since the creative artefacts must be considered as the basis for the contribution to new knowledge. We can consider Graeme Sullivan's differences here between an inquiry in and *about* the visual arts, in and *with* the visual arts, and in and *through* the visual arts[26]. The self-referential aspect of working reflectively in the studio work determines that this project is both an inquiry *in* and *through* the visual arts.

This project situates itself within a context of process-led research that seeks to critically examine the human mediation process of working with materials. Working as a maker means taking on the lives of materials, and getting involved in the way things behave through working with the activity of materials. Deep physical thinking is reflected in the process of working through and with materials, which speak of human and nonhuman experiences. The studio allows for dichotomies and tensions to arise within working processes that are seeking to physically question theoretical propositions. Tensions arise between energies moving in different directions within a piece of work, as well as different cultural readings of a work. Repeating ideas in different materials develops, strengthens, and also weakens these tensions. How to synthesise materials, sources, and invention had been a question that was initially propelling the studio work at the beginning of the project. This gave way to allow for the making parts of the project to not be encumbered by trying to illustrate ideas through art. This acknowledgement then helped to structure the written thesis, by starting with the historical and theoretical requirements of answering the research questions through looking at the work of current and historical artists. This enabled me to see the implications of the research in relation to my own work for chapter four, which allowed for a clearer structure of the thesis. Not only does this structure provide a more focused investigation into my own practice as an ending to the project, but it also provides further points of departure for more making after the project's completion.

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[23] Elkins, '*What is Art Research?*'
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Charles Garoian, 'Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in the Visual Arts', *Studies in Art Education A Journal of Issues and Research* 48 (1) (2006), pp. 108-112, p.110

The academic and artistic contributions that this thesis makes can be understood in two, interconnected parts. Part one is the theoretical aspect of readdressing a historical phenomenon that connects to current philosophy and art criticism, and part two is the knowledge and understanding gained through the practice of making. The written thesis aims to advance scholarly debate on the apparent dichotomies between formalist readings of artworks with new materialist perspectives. This entails re-readings, crossovers and a hybridised framework which seeks to bring together the prioritisation of aesthetic qualities and intrinsic properties of art, with the dynamic and yet sticky interplay of humans, non-humans, materials, and environments. The framework of bringing these two aspects together is an attempt to further understand if and how a formalist perspective can be said to enhance our understanding of new materialism, and to help us further understand the multifaceted nature of making and beholding art. It therefore proposes an additional mode of interpreting artistic practices across cultural and historical contexts. As an artist-researcher, my practice forms a mode of inquiry, expression, and experimentation, with its resulting work being both influenced by theory and driven by practice itself. Though its contributions and influences are less tangible perhaps, they are more open to interpretation to the world at large. The contributions the works make cannot be made to conform to theoretical concepts and must be allowed to touch upon concerns of formalism and new materialism in non-direct, correlational and contingent ways, in lighter and freer ways.

0.5 A new materialist framework in practice-based research

The new materialist turn articulates why an arts practice forms a coherent body of epistemological and ontological research. Its relevance is in setting up a methodological framework that contextualises studio practice as research. Interdisciplinary artist, researcher, and Professor at the Université du Québec à Rimouski Danielle Boutet observes that 'studio practice is not the kind of thinking where one finds *answers* to *questions*, but rather where one *contemplates* and *experiences* situations, themes or feeling complexes or ways of being.'[27] In providing a framework that encourages dialogue between maker, matter, and discourse, a new materialist framework encourages a rethinking of the dynamics between subject – object relations. Central to the argument in this thesis, Boutet also identifies a common misconception about a new materialist approach, namely that the nature of human subjectivity in making is incompatible with a flat ontology: 'The centrality of the subject and human agency in meaning-making processes does not negate the agency of objects.'[28] It's not that a new materialist perspective fails to acknowledge the maker's humanity and wish to bypass subjective complexities, but more that 'the subject, or the one who observes is, 'heterogenous' – both a subject of rational thought and the symbolic as well as of biological processes.'[29] When seeing an artwork though this perspective, the performative potential of the artwork appears as it becomes a locus of active reflection, mirroring ideas and thoughts back to the artist which were previously not accessible or realised.

In terms of art and exhibitions, the work of two contemporary artists helps us to see how we might read an artwork through a new materialist lens, French artist Pierre Huyghe and Nigerian-American artist Precious Okoyomon. In the centre of Kassel, Germany, lies Karlsaue, a romantic and picturesque 18th century park filled with grand vistas, neoclassical architecture, and quaint bridges connecting the land over lakes and canals. In 2012, at the back of this park, in a disused and overgrown lot, French artist Pierre Huyghe brought an altogether different aesthetic to the park. A bizarre, unconnected conglomeration of things came to occupy the exhibition space: a statue with a beehive for a head, composting hills with psychotropic plants poking out of them, paving stones, an over-turned bench and, most famously nowadays, a white dog with a pink leg. This was just some of what was happening at the time in the exhibition space, which came to be known as *Untilled* (fig. 1). All of these elements simply *were* at the time. Some of these elements maybe still just *are,* even right now. Things are shifting without our awareness, without our knowing it.

[27] Danielle Boutet, 'Metaphors of the mind', in Barrett, E. & Bolt, B. (Eds.) *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' through the arts.* (London/ New York: I.B Tauris, 2013) p.30
[28] Boutet, p.65
[29] Boutet quoting Julia Kristeva, p.64

Fig. 1. Pierre Huyghe, *Untilled,* 2012, Installation view, concrete with beehive structure, 30 x 57 x 18 inches. Photo: Jonathan Muzikar.

Huyghe's title refers to Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexkull's theory of *Umwelt,* developed in the 20th century. The theory proposes that though different species may be co-present in the same world, we do not perceive the world in the same way. Huyghe believes that this theory can be bypassed and asks whether this world can be shared by the conglomeration of things, events and organisms present. In the world of Huyghe, an exhibition space is a laboratory, a place where systems and ecosystems of things are happening, unfolding, and refolding themselves continuously. The artist, and we as beholder, are part of this relation of things interacting, or not interacting with each other. Things are not dependent on the artist, nor are they dependent on the beholder. There are multiple, unstable, indeterminate, living algorithms at play here. Traditional categorical boundaries that distinguish between human/ non-human, organic/ fabricated, cultural/ world are in doubt, as Huyghe's exhibitions illustrate the porous interconnectivity between these elements. Rather than seeing them as individual, isolated or even autonomous elements, we can begin to see them as exchange processes working on a much vaster scale. What's more, we can see that such a thing as an 'autonomous object' doesn't actually exist. 'Each one is self-organised, and at the same time needs the others'[30], says Huyghe.

From an aesthetic point of view, Art historian Dorothea von Hantelmann notes, 'it was unclear what had been artistically altered and what hadn't, where the

[30] Dorothea Von Hantelmann, 'Situated Cosmo-Technologies: Pierre Huyghe's Untilled and After Alife Ahead' in *Pierre Huyghe* (London: Serpentine Galleries, 2019) p.13

composting facility ended, and the work of art began. An interplay of the composition and uncomposed-ness characterised the site and made it seem awkwardly charged.'[31] A shift occurs from viewing the work as site specific, which arguably maintains an anthropocentric bracket around the artwork, to site relational instead. Instead, we see in action Donna Haraway's notion of situated knowledge, which points to 'an array of dynamic forces and scales that also go beyond human subject perception and are indifferent to its presence.'[32] Von Hantelmann identifies the self-reflexive nature of these things and forces at play:

> 'When what is made is not necessarily due to the artist as the only operator, the only one generating intentions and that instead it's an ensemble of intelligences, of entities biotic or abiotic, beyond human reach, and that the present situation has no duration, is not addressed to anyone, is indifferent, at that moment perhaps the ritual of the exhibition can self-present.'[33]

There is a slowness and a vastness about the continuum of the exhibition. Its activities and developments have been set in motion long before the artist or spectator was there and will continue to morph long after the exhibition closes its doors. This also resonates with London-born artist Precious Okoyomon, whose 2022 installation at the Venice Biennale entitled *To See the Earth Before the End of the World* (fig. 2) featured Kudzu and sugar cane plants, live butterflies, and copious amounts of soil, bridges and waterways. Okoyomon brings plants and animals into the exhibition space where not only are they living and breathing agents acting and interacting with audiences, but also function as living metaphors for the legacies of slavery, racialisation and the results of colonisation and diaspora. The Kudzu plant, a species of vine native to China and Japan which was introduced to help better American soil in the 1870s, quickly became invasive and began to dominate the surrounding areas in Mississippi where it was first grown[34]. The Kudzu becomes a symbol of resistance, a survivor of being uprooted from its own native soil and thriving in a new place despite potentially intolerable conditions. The artist says:

> 'I guess the entire work is about the Blackness of the earth. But a lot of times when I look at that, Blackness, in my work, I am looking at the actual entanglement of the social fiction of race with living and non-living things. But with the

[31] Von Hantelmann, p.12
[32] Von Hantelmann, p.15
[33] Pierre Huyghe in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, recorded video conversation, 2018, https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/whats-on/pierre-huyghe-uumwelt/ [accessed 04/05/22]
[34] Madeline Weisburg, 'Precious Okoyomon', La Biennale Website, 2022, https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/milk-dreams/precious-okoyomon [accessed 18/12/22]

butterflies, it's something almost different. It's just their flight, their beautiful flight, constant. This is Blackness as the earth.'[35]

Through Okoyomon's installation, we see the significance of reconsidering agency through diverse beings as central to our understanding of meaning, expression and personal and political stories. We also see how we are embedded in these global systems of power and oppression, where beings such as plants and butterflies and even the cement that connects one part of the installation to the next all form part of a wider dialogue about power structures, ecological revolt and new futures.

Fig. 2. Precious Okoyomon, *To See the Earth Before the End of the World,* 2022, Installation view, dimensions variable. Photo: Roberto Marossi.

[35] Ayanna Dozier, 'Precious Okoyomon Ushers Dirt, Blood, and Butterflies into Venice Biennale', paragraph 9, 2022, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-precious-okoyomon-ushers-dirt-blood-butterflies-venice-biennale [accessed 20/04/2023]

0.6 Summary of thesis

The first chapter begins with an account of the term agency in relation to the artwork with the help of British anthropologist Alfred Gell and British artist Phyllida Barlow. Michael Fried's *Art and Objecthood* is then deconstructed to develop a framework for exploring how, when and in what instances agency and autonomy might be determined in an artwork. This reworlding of formalism will set up three main criteria for considering several case studies using the work of Anthony Caro, Cy Twombly, Ashton Philips, Isa Genzken, and Jilaine Jones.

Chapter two considers a more complex reading of agency in relation to painting, and several difficulties which arise in identifying its occurrence. A brief introduction to the expanded field of painting serves as a basis on which to the consider the self-reflexivity of painting, as identified by art critics Isabelle Graw and Hanneke Grootenboer. Grootenboer's *The Pensive Image* (2020) and Graw's *Thinking through Painting: Reflexivity and Agency beyond the Canvas* (2012) and *Painting beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition (2016)* provide the springboards off which to explore the paintings of Philip Guston, Luc Tuymans, and Amy Sillman.

Chapter three looks at a reimagined notion of agency through formal qualities of sculptures and paintings, focusing on the works of Katharina Grosse, Jules Olitski, Rachel Harrison and Clintel Steed. The writings of Amy Sillman provide a good basis on which to explore the potential of colour to be an active agent in art objects. The chapter briefly looks at the cognitive and sensory processes of perceiving colour, before a focused study on the works of Jules Olitski and Katharina Grosse. Despite their different aims and time periods as artists, their approaches to working with colour in spray guns offer us ways in which colour need not only be a descriptive factor in an artwork but instead have a myriad of agential properties which affects us in a multitude of ways. The chapter goes on to look at several sculptures by American artist Rachel Harrison, which often defy categorization and seem to counter any notion of ideological or aesthetic authority. This openness to random compositions, alongside Clintel Steed's boldly constructed and weighty paintings further open out potential agential readings in formal qualities of contemporary artworks.

Chapter four accounts for the research undertaken in my studio in relation to the project. A brief explanation of the methodology behind the practical projects introduces chapter four, alongside the reasoning behind material choices and positioning the work in relation to ecological and formal artistic practices. Chapter four mirrors the structure of the previous three chapters as it reflects first on notions of agency in relation to the objects created in the studio. It then addresses self-generated painterly reflexivity through the works produced in a join residency and exhibition at Patriothall Gallery in March 2023. Finally, we come to consider the

agential potential of colour, composition, and material in several installations in Edinburgh and Glasgow during the end of 2023/ beginning of 2024.

The final chapter draws together the most pertinent parts of each chapter in relation to the research questions posed in the introduction, namely how can a new materialist account for the human act of creation, and how can a return to formalism help us in answering this question. We circle back to the importance of Harman's call to re-examine the connection between formalism and new materialism, as it provides a mode of exploring the autonomy of an artwork itself. We will see how Fried's formalism can provide an aesthetic account of things in new materialist discourse through the examination of objects, then paintings, then through the phenomena of colour, composition and materials. We come to see how the theories discussed in the first three chapters of the thesis allow the practical aspects of working as a maker in the studio to remain alive and unburdened by theory, whilst also being influenced by and influencing the written aspects of the thesis.

Chapter One: Objects and Agency

1.1 Seeing agency through a new materialist lens

Three giants stand together in a wood. Two towers topped with loops, ringing of steel; clattering, electrical units, unhappy monoliths. Informing, repeating, communicating, informing, repeating, communicating, informing, repeating, communicating… Nearby a pile of steps recede to nothingness. Steep steps of a Mayan temple, sacrificial in weight, suicidal in height. Oblong, dirty slabs incised all the way up. Top section skewed, like squint teeth. Yet the stairway slouches, 90's cartoon-like, Philip Guston grey, pointless, blobby. Bubble letters with a slit for a gap, fatty, loose; in opposition to this electrical alertness of the uprights. They are a different idea, of a different time and process. Peculiarities of time surface whilst walking around these sculptures: is this grouping historically and technologically ancient, or part of our collective dystopian now/future? Perhaps just vestiges of communication, or methods of transportation, the posts seem reminiscent of telegraph poles and electricity pylons. Gargantuan methods of transmission whose very structure transmits a new language, unintelligible, mute, overbearing and demanding. But despite this, all materials, scale and presence remain connected, in this 'bumptious' [36] relations of things. The mechanics of making sit on the external side of these works, the mortar and cement visible for all to see. These are Donna Haraway's 'Cyborg Littermates', their dense materiality and semiotic 'thingness' are 'ontologically heterogenous, historically situated, materially rich, virally proliferating relatings of particular sorts.'[37] If we were to anthropomorphise these statues as figures, as persons, they seem ghastly in scale and yet indifferent at the same time. What does anthropomorphising do here, and how do these sculptures help us understand the term agency? To begin to answer these questions, let us begin to unpack the contentious term 'agency', through a closer examination of artist Phyllida Barlow's work (fig. 3) alongside the writings of Alfred Gell. What does this term mean, why is it significant for us in relation to formalism, and what does the term mean to us as artists?

British anthropologist Alfred Gell (1945 – 1997) provides an important starting point in considering the notion of agency in relation to 'things' in his 1997 book *Art and Agency*:

> 'To suggest that art objects, to figure in an 'anthropological' theory of art, have to be considered as 'persons', seems a bizarre notion. But only if one fails to bear in mind that the entire historical tendency of anthropology has been towards

[36] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p.105
[37] Haraway, p.104

a radical defamiliarization and relativization of the notion of 'persons'. Since the outset of the discipline, anthropology has been signally preoccupied with a series of problems to do with ostensibly peculiar relations between persons and 'things' which somehow 'appear as', or do duty as, persons.'[38]

Fig. 3. Phyllida Barlow, *Quarry,* 2018, installation view, concrete, reinforced steel, Jupiter Artland.

Most notable for makers is the relational, or contextual, understanding of Gell's agency, namely a characteristic that can be ascribed to both persons and things who/which can initiate causal events. He asserts that things fall under a 'secondary' category of agents, that appear in relation with 'certain specific (human) associates'[39]. Using an example of a car to demonstrate the symbiotic relations between agent and its corresponding 'patient' as being mutually dependent, Gell says: 'My car is a (potential) agent with respect to me as a 'patient', not in respect to itself, as a car. It is an agent only in so far as I am a patient, and it is a 'patient' (the counterpart of an agent) only is so far as I am an agent with respect to it.'[40] Under this secondary

[38] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.9
[39] Gell, p.17
[40] Gell, p.22

category of agents, we can begin to see how a physical object becomes both a locus and a conduit for the agency of others, and itself. On a basic level then within an arts context, we may understand the agency of an artwork in such simple ways as having the capacity to affect a spectator through formal/technical excellence, arousing or disgusting a spectator, and compelling a spectator to revere, or even touch, kiss or hold an object or icon. Though things do not have intentions as such, 'things with their thingly causal properties are as essential to the exercise of agency as states of mind.'[41]

Certain new materialist thinkers make a more radical move in reassessing the term agency. In a passage in Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010) the political theorist and philosopher brings to our attention the 'dead weight of adamantine chains'[42]. These are the unbreakable bonds that tie Prometheus to the jagged rocks by Hephaestus, in a play by Aeschylus. Bennett draws out the paradox of these seemingly dead, unyielding and lifeless weight of metal being simultaneously full of pulsing vibrancy and life, capable of restraining the mightiest of forces. More than simply re-examining the relations between subject and object, Bennett endorses a new 'material vitalism'; rather than remaining caught in the linguistic traps where the object tends to be described passively and the subject actively, we need to 'detach materiality from the figures of passive, mechanistic or divinely infused substance'[43]. Bennett repositions the object as having potential, agential force and acting upon us. Under her framework, we find our thoughts reoriented to accommodate ideas where 'things' intrude, change and become part of us, from food to metals, from electrical blackouts to cellular division. Diana Coole, co-author of *New Materialism: Ontology, Agency, and Politics,* also underlines the significance of reading phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty's notion of agency as reflexive, creative and transformational, rather than a characteristic of a rational subject[44]. We begin to get a sense of a wider understanding of agency than a merely human attribute through the detection of agency and its effects as 'factor[s] of the ambience as a whole, a global characteristic of the world of people and things in which we live'[45].

With this understanding, we may consider Barlow's sculptures in terms of their capacity as nonhuman forces to exert power in the surrounding natural world and the human body. The dialogue, the physical navigation, the internal and external discourses that arise with the works are ongoing instants in the entanglement between body, material and site. Colours, too, have discourse with their environment. Patches are scraped on and brushed off (Barlow tells her assistants ''Do the paint as if you're

[41] Gell, p.20
[42] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p.54
[43] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p.xiii
[44] Diana Coole, 'The Inertia of Matter and the Generativity of Flesh', in Diana Coole & Samantha Frost (Eds.) *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) p.113
[45] Gell, p.20

cleaning the windows' or 'Put the plaster on as if you're mending cracks in the road'.'[46]) Scratchy, sgraffito marks connect with barren trees in the late winter. Flat, block colours would separate object from environment completely. Cherry pinks, minty greens and buff titaniums interact with the surrounding scraggly landscape, despite the contrast between the pastel colours and muted tones of the trees. Unapologetically bulky, potent objects, they resemble the ugly, heaving masses of organic and inorganic matter that slither around in Timothy Morton's 2013 essay *Hyperobjects:*

> 'Meanwhile, despite Nature, despite grey goo, real things writhe and smack into one another. Some leap out because industry malfunctions, or functions only too well. Oil bursts out of its ancient sinkhole and floods the Gulf of Mexico. Gamma rays shoot out of plutonium for twenty-four thousand years. Hurricanes congeal out of massive storm systems, fed by the heat from the burning of fossil fuels. The ocean of telephone dials mounts ever higher. Paradoxically, capitalism has unleashed myriad objects upon us, in their manifold horror and sparkling splendor. Two hundred years of idealism, two hundred years of seeing humans at the center of existence, and now the objects take revenge, terrifyingly huge, ancient, long-lived, threateningly minute, invading every cell in our body.[47]

Gell's understanding of agency does not necessarily align with the views of more recent new materialist writers. Karen Barad, Distinguished Professor of Feminist Studies and Philosophy at the University of California at Santa Cruz, and author of *Meeting the Universe Half-way,* describes agency as akin to 'enactment'. Agency is therefore not an attribute to people or things, but to the process of cause and effect being enacted: 'it is the enactment of iterative changes to particular practices'[48]. Meanwhile fellow feminist theoretician and philosopher Rosi Braidotti's idea of agency is related to political subjectivity and is a term that denotes the power structures at play which either inhibit or allow for the reconfiguring of individual and group autonomy[49]. In terms of Barad's concept, the iterative processes of action, mediation and response of painting and sculpture suggest an artist is heavily embedded in the playing out of cause and effect in the studio. Jane Bennett's notion of agency can be found in her notion of multiple-participant assemblages. Such things as power cuts and pandemics demonstrate that non-human things can be afforded

[46] Phyllida Barlow, *cul-de-sac* (Suffolk: ACC Art Books Ltd, 2019) p.39
[47] Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p.13
[48] Barad, *Meeting the Universe Half-way*, p.178
[49] Felicity J. Colman, Agency, from the COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) Action's Scholarship Project 'How Matter Comes to Matter', in The Working Group's Almanac (2018) http://newmaterialism.eu/almanc/a/agency.html paragraph 2 [accessed 04/10/2023]

similar significance in terms of inherent value and power that human actants are typically given. Anthropologist Tim Ingold meanwhile helps us with a more expansive reading of agency, where it is not necessarily things which 'have agency' but belong to what he describes as 'currents of the lifeworld. The properties of materials, then, are not fixed attributes of matter but are processual and relational. To describe these properties means telling their stories.'[50]

Things alone don't 'have' agency, agency is instead contingent on the level of entanglement with other things around it. Things having discourse with their environment, shifting our perceptions of environments, and acting even regardless of whether we are there or not. We can argue therefore that rather than a sculpture either 'having or not having agency', the agency of things is dependent on the nature of their entanglement in the fabric of social and cultural relationships. The self-reciprocal nature of artistic agency is also evident in the studio, as the following case studies will demonstrate. Gell notes, 'Every artist is a patient with respect to the agency s/he exercises […] One is a spectator of one's own efforts at drawing; that is one has become a patient. Subliminally, one asks 'would I recognise this (index) as the chair I wanted to draw' just as if it had been drawn by someone else.'[51] We may also consider the artwork as agential in the sense of mediating the identity of the artist, and thus attains a quasi-person status itself, an idea that Isabelle Graw delineates and will be explored in more depth later on.

I hang around these giant 'things' for some time, drawing, photographing and standing in their dinosaur-like presence. After a while, I leave.

[50] Tim Ingold, 'Materials against materiality', *Archaeological Dialogues*, 14 (1) pp. 1 – 16, p.1
[51] Gell, p.45

1.2 Reimagining the makers world through a formalist critique

Despite occasionally objecting to the use of the term 'formalism', Michael Fried describes his own understanding of the word as '(1): considerations of subject matter are systematically subordinated to considerations of 'form,' and (2) the latter are understood as invariable or transhistorical in their significance'[52]. If the meaning in an artwork is reliant on additional or extraneous factors, such as subject matter, narrative content, biographical/ economic/ cultural and socio-political contexts, the autonomy of the artwork becomes compromised through these external relations. Both Harman and Fried insist that meaning must come from the internal workings of the artwork, or else it is danger of being simply summed up by a list of its attributes and relations to other things. According to Polish philosopher Bohdan Dziemidok, another definition of aesthetic formalism could be 'a body of ideas according to which the aesthetic value of natural or created objects (or of states of things) is determined by its form, understood as the visibly (sensually) perceived overall appearance of the object or the arrangement of its parts.'[53] It is a discourse which attempts to find the inherent value of a work of art in the manner it has been created, constructed, and presented, and the meaning it is expressing through these aspects. Given this definition, we might be able to interpret works as objects in their own right through considerations of their own particular parameters. Here, I maintain that a re-examination of certain aspects of Fried's formalist criteria provide a new dimension to a new materialist critique of the artwork. Taking the self-referential nature of formalist critique itself, I will outline several key criteria that Fried mentions in his 1967 essay *Art and Objecthood*. I will explore these criteria, namely relationality, presence, and anthropomorphism, as modes of considering the artwork in and of itself, rather than through its relations to the beholder. Looking at a diverse group of historical and contemporary artists, we will see how these criteria are central to the new materialist task of decentring human centrality by repositioning the object in its place.

[52] Harman, *Art + Objects,* p.49

[53] Bohdan Dziemidok, 'Artistic Formalism: Its Achievements and Weaknesses', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 51(2) (1993) pp.185 – 193 (p.189)

1.3 Relationality

1) *Autonomy can be determined through the degree of interactions between the relations of an artwork's elements.*

Fried's formalist critique discouraged symbolic representation through his critique of the 'theatrical', the tendency he saw in Minimalist or what he termed 'literalist' artworks to rely on and call out for the presence of a beholder: 'the literalist espousal of objecthood amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theatre, and theatre is now the negation of art'[54]. The extrapolation of meaning in an artwork could be determined instead by prioritising the analysis of relationships between elements in the work itself, rather than through the theatrical portrayal of narrative based on a direct relationship with the audience. British sculptor Anthony Caro (1924 – 2013) was known for his modernist sculpture, which was often abstract in nature and made from industrial materials such as steel, aluminium and iron. The acknowledgement of the qualities and tendencies of sculptural materials themselves, whilst not always the top priority, was of clear significance to Caro in his bid towards building more abstract sculpture[55].

In Caro's *Yellow Swing* (fig. 4) from 1965, a series of painted steel shapes interact, balance, and extend out from one another, after having been placed on the gallery floor. The planar aspect to the geometric structures constantly shifts as we move around the sculpture, rectilinear aspects extend towards us, then suddenly shrink, a large diamond balanced on a fine point disappears into a paper-thin plane. Spaces in between the various elements open up and mirror aspects of the physical shapes themselves. Speaking about Caro's work, Fried says:

> '[t]he individual elements bestow significance on one another precisely by virtue of their juxtaposition: it is in this sense, a sense inextricably involved with the concept of meaning, that everything in Caro's art that is worth looking at is in its syntax.'[56]

The reading of such a sculpture based on how shapes interact with other shapes, where areas of motion, inertia, or merely implied relations exist between elements, helps us to understand the inner workings or framework of a sculpture on its own terms. The internal structuring of an artwork becomes just as significant to the artwork as the external structuring, colleague of Caro's at Central St Martins and sculptor Jilaine Jones, says:

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[54] Fried, p.153

[55] 'I've never wanted to take sculpture right out of reality into the realm of illusion, out of thingness, weight or physicality. I don't necessarily want to call attention all the time to sculpture's physicality, but I am forced to take these qualities into account, just as the painter cannot ignore the qualities of his medium.' Phyllis Tuchman, 'An Interview with Anthony Caro', *Artforum,* 10(10) (1971) pp. 56 – 58 (p.56)

[56] Fried, p.162

> ‘What happens physically between the viewer and the parts or passages of the sculpture is as important as its own internal ordering: this ordering is informed by the inside experience of the body through a space and the view through the eyes of the subject becoming extended *as* structure and incorporated content.’[57]

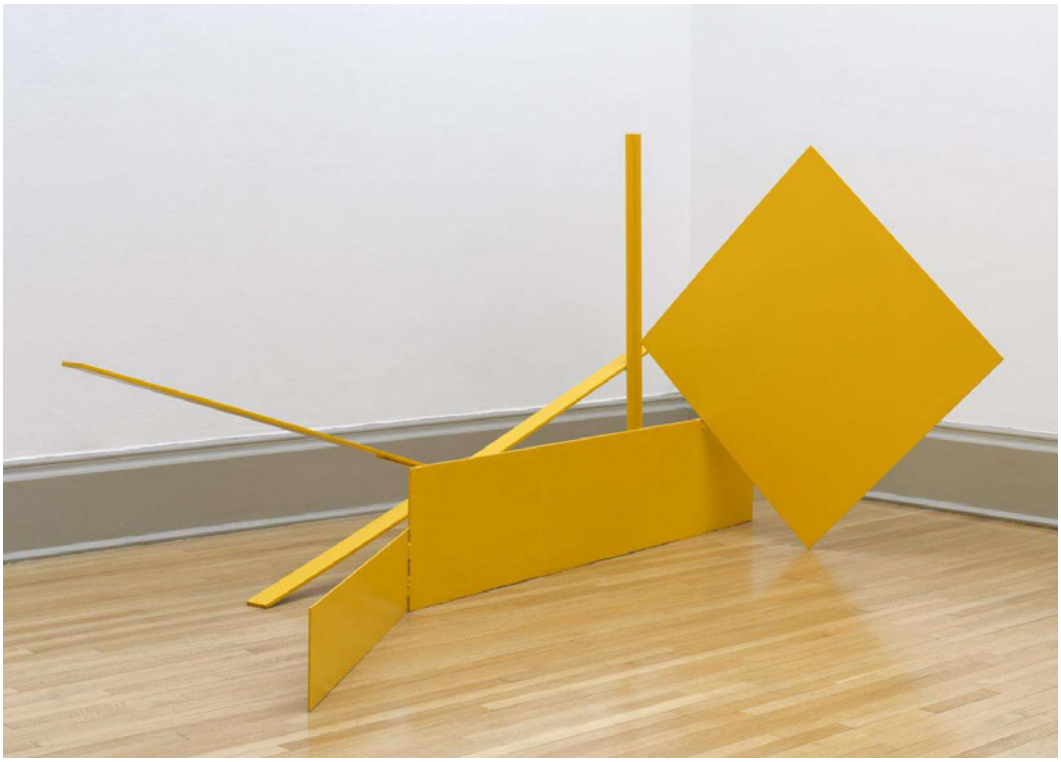

Fig. 4. Anthony Caro, *Yellow Swing,* 1965, painted steel, 70 x 77 x 156 inches. Photo: Tate Galleries.

There is empathy, support between each element, an understanding of how these pieces fit together, rest together, stay together. Matthew Rampley identifies one of the first authors to explore the idea of empathy and affect in artworks as Aby M. Warburg, who ‘took empathy to denote not merely a psychological act or capacity, but also a specific stage in human cognitive development, namely, primitive and undifferentiated absorption in the objective world’[58]. This late 19th century conception of aesthetic empathy could be updated today to read as an unconscious physiological reaction that causes us to enliven the world around us. Empathy here indicates a correspondence and mimicking between human bodily gestures and those found in sculptural materials or matter. It is the instinctual blurring of self and world that occurs when we experience something other than ourselves. Caro’s syntax, his sculptural vocabulary and his different iterations (fig. 5), present creative responses to the binds that limit the theoretical discussion of subjectivity. Rather than seeking to escape the

[57] Susan Rosenberg, ‘Body Conscious: New Sculpture by Jilaine Jones’, *Exhibition Catalogue for Jilaine Jones: Sculpture, New York Studio School 05/06/08 – 19/07/08* (NYSS: The Studley Press, 2008)
[58] Matthew Rampley, ‘Agency, affect and intention in art history: some observations’ *The Journal of Art Historiography,* 24 (2021), p.3

inevitable human references that inherently bracket discussions of substance, language and structure, a formalist reading of these works help us to move forward through acknowledging these binds creatively. Using formalist analysis to expand upon creative play and process offers us a mode of reciprocal engagement with the world, as it provides a dialectical experience or encounter despite its mediation through human language.

Fig. 5. Anthony Caro, *Table Piece CCLXVI*, 1975, 31 x 80 x 50 inches.

In contrast to this idea of internal relations being set up in a sculpture, and referencing only themselves, Rosalind Krauss' observes how the Minimalists were denying essentialised, centralised, and interior spaces in form building, rather than setting up a dynamic between a symbolic interior space and its external form. She writes:

> 'To string elements together without emphasis or logical termination is clearly to defeat the idea of a center or a focus toward which forms point or build. One arrives at a mode of composition from which the idea of *inner* necessity has been removed: the idea that the explanation for a particular configuration of forms or textures on the surface of an object is to be looked for at its center. In structural or abstract terms, compositional devices of the minimalists deny the logical importance of the interior space of forms—an interior space

> which much of previous twentieth-century sculpture had celebrated.'[59]

Contrary to Fried's sense of relationality, Krauss also draws our attention to the qualities of repetition and sameness, a sense of continuity, of 'one thing after another'[60] in non-hierarchical orderings, echoing shifting ideas in post-structuralist thought surrounding meaning, language and existence. Donald Judd, one of the leading proponents of Minimalism figure whose work was critiqued by Fried in *Art and Objecthood,* explained how relational composition failed to resonate with him:

> 'In explaining why he objected to relational composition, Judd followed with, "It is that they're linked up with a philosophy—rationalism, rationalist philosophy. ... All that art is based on systems built beforehand, a priori systems; they express a certain type of thinking and logic that is pretty much discredited now as a way of finding out what the world's like."'[61]

Here we are presented with a shift in understanding meaning as existing in external relations, through unlimited parameters, and in between the relationships of things, with no contained whole. This opposes Fried's formalist principles of meaning as relating to internal elements, relational and essential meaning in and of itself, unrelated to external factors and the suggestion of metaphorical meaning existing beyond the material itself. This shift is more reflective of new materialist thought which understands relations between human and non-humans as inherently entangled. There can be no such thing as a truly autonomous artwork under these conditions, and nor can there be any truly original work in any essential sense. Instead, modernist artworks operate within a field of repetition, deferral, and discourse, just as the works of Minimalist artworks. So too do Greenberg and Fried's emphasis on medium specificity ignore the fluid, interdisciplinary nature of many artworks and overlooks the fact that the notion of a seemingly pure and irreducible medium is in itself mythical; mediums are culturally constructed, subject to historical changes and redefinitions. Instead, the concept of medium can be better defined by the interplay and tension between different and multiple forms, which reflects a more postmodern entanglement with the world as a maker, as Krauss notes:

> 'For, within the situation of postmodernism, practice is not defined in relation to a given medium – sculpture - but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium - photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors, or sculpture itself-might be used.'[62]

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[59] Krauss, p.253
[60] Krauss, p.244
[61] Donald Judd, quoted by Krauss, p.244
[62] Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' *October, Vol. 8, 1979*, pp. 31–44 (p.42)

In the formalist preoccupation with relations and relationships between elements, we see a mirroring of a new materialist prioritisation of material liveliness and material knowledge. 'Meaning' and its various connotations is something that is an inherently human concept. With a new materialist lens, there is no inherent 'meaning' in a selection of objects, or in the way that a collection of colours coalesces on a canvas. 'Meaning' is to be found in the links and relations between elements. A rejection of the search for meaning therefore allows us to focus on the relations that arise in these works with the elements in and around them[63]. The work of LA-based artist Ashton Philips (fig. 6) documents the contemporary, cultural ruins of our times, corroded and crumbling remnants of our society and the botched attempts to wind and weave these fragments together successfully. He seems to collect and put all these human and material fragments together; the labour, waste, distractions, hopes and relics of convenience jumbled together in a mass of unrealised ambition. It is the complex relations between things and us that is highlighted in Philips' work. Here we all are in this business together, coexisting, and not coexisting, caring, not caring, living, dying, breeding, catastrophising, forgetting. Benjamin Buchloh, Professor of Modern Art at Harvard University notes that the 'total submission to the terror of consumption is indeed the governing stratum of collective object-relations, that psychotic state may well become the only position and practice the sculptor of the future can articulate.'[64]

[63] As noted in conversation about the studio work in a supervisory meeting by supervisor Dr. E. Hodson. She observes, 'it is not that these things necessarily 'mean' anything individually, they are meaning in and of themselves.'

[64] Benjamin Buchloh, 'All Things Being Equal', in *Art Forum 44(3)* (2005) *pp 224 – 230, available from* https://www.artforum.com/print/200509/all-things-being-equal-isa-genzken-9738 [accessed 08/10/2022]

Fig. 6. Ashton Philips, *Gravitational Pull ("Fireman Sam"),* 2022, unwanted plastic toys, fire extinguisher, PVC pipe, driftwood, found plastic bottles, partially consumed styrofoam, rope, wool, textile, mycelium-reinforced earthen plaster, lime, mineral oxide pigments, vinyl emulsion paint, reflective spray, concrete block, rebar 48 x 58 x 36 inches. Photo: Ashton Philips.

Jane Bennett describes such interconnecting networks of human and non-human elements as 'assemblages' in her 2010 book *Vibrant Matter.* These assemblages are 'ad hoc groupings of diverse elements of vibrant materials of all sorts'[65], which are continually affecting and being affected by each other. This recalls 20th century American sculptor Cy Twombly's small sculptures (fig. 7), in which we are primarily confronted with direct, material substances chosen by the artist over any clear representation or image. Art historian Kate Nesin observes that this direct relation to the materiality of objects themselves presents itself clearly in Twombly's work, and 'prove[s] no guarantor of experiential access of interpretive or contextual determinacy.'[66] Holding a similar view to new materialist Jane Bennett in advocacy of the word 'things', Nesin uses the word to talk expansively about his work:

> ''Things' provided a purposefully as well as overtly capacious label, a way of holding together despite multiplicity and uncertainty, and a way of ratifying the sculpture's apparent material informality, weathered oddments bedimmed by sometimes weathered paint'[67] […]''Thing' is the

[65] Bennett, p.32
[66] Kate Nesin, *Cy Twombly's Things,* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2014), p.10
[67] Nesin, p.12

> quintessential catch-all, a placeholder for that which is not, need not, or cannot be named, whether a concrete, physical, tangible thing; an ephemeral, conceptual, notional thing; or an anything, a something, a nothing.'[68]

Though the use of the found object may evoke images of 20th century sculpture, the indexical reading of things in relation to their current environment is in continual flux. Assemblage is emergent in nature, since the potential agentic events that derive from an assemblage are different from the sum total of the forces that the individual components contain[69]. A prosaic reading of assemblages leads us to a place where we are faced simultaneously with the presence of their uncompromising materiality as well as their unstable conceptual readings.

Twombly's objects can maintain their autonomy when they resist ideas, notions and assumptions that we ascribe to them. The identification of these assemblages as 'things' provides an open-ended signpost that helps to retain their autonomous edge, that refuses to be undermined (explained by its component parts) or overmined (explained by its relations and effects on other things). In resisting language, 'things' become active or 'operative'[70], meaning we can directly access and prioritise the material qualities over the relational qualities of an object. These 'things' are the result of working in tandem with all the elements simultaneously, meaning each part is significant in its correlation to the sculpture as a whole. The agency that arises through the material relations in compositional assemblages may therefore be more pronounced than in individual objects.

[68] Nesin, p.30
[69] Bennett, p.24
[70] Nesin, p.15

Fig. 7. Cy Twombly, *Untitled, Humpty Dumpty,* 2004, Bronze, plaster, 29 x 19 x 10 inches. Photo: Gagosian.

1.4 Presence

2) Agency can be determined by the presence[71] of an object, and its capacity to alter the space and environment around it. The object as such places demands on the space that issue from its own objective existence. The presence of an artwork, in turn, can be determined through 'objecthood', or by the look of non-art.

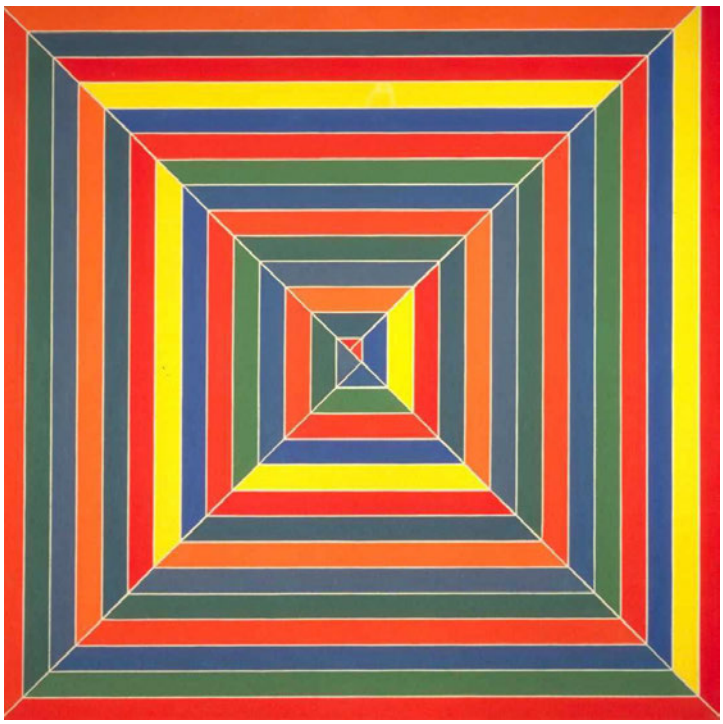

Fig. 8. Frank Stella, *Hyena Stomp,* 1962, alkyd paint on canvas, 78 x 78 inches. Photo: Tate Gallery.

Fried notes the tendency of paintings by Jules Olitski, Frank Stella (fig. 8) and Kenneth Noland (fig. 9) to 'affirm that the entire surface, which is to say *every bit* of it, is spread out before the beholder – that every grain or particle or atom of surface *competes for presentness* with every other.'[72] We may equate the word 'presentness' with aliveness here, where every particle or atom of the surface reaches out to us in its unique manifestation as a material element. This assertion fits within the bracket of flat, non-illusionistic painting, styles which Fried and fellow art historian Clement Greenberg revered at the time. Paintings which seek to describe illusionary space, figures, objects or environments would not fit into this category, as there is not an equal 'spreading' of the surface as such – in order to create depth certain areas of paint might be applied thinly, thickly, with scumbling marks, or varnished differently to achieve such a reading. As examples in sculpture, Fried uses Anthony Caro and David Smith's works,

[71] The word presence for Fried had a direct link to the theatrical, as in a 'stage' presence, and presented a concern for what he termed 'theatrical' works. These were works of art which seemed to exist solely for an audience, and were thus reliant on the prescribed relationship between beholder and object to activate the work. Artworks which seem to suspend the nature of objecthood, distancing themselves from the beholder and thus not 'in need' of an audience, made for more of an autonomous artwork.
[72] Fried, p.27

which contain 'a continuous and entire *presentness,* amounting, as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness'[73]. The sculptures seem as if they are representing themselves as continuously unfolding in the present moment. We are kept in a state of presence with these sculptures, as they don't seem to have beginnings, middles or endings, instead a continued state of existence.

The works of Olitski, Stella and Noland held 'an increasing preoccupation with problems and issues intrinsic to painting itself'[74], and that these issues were 'formal' in nature, as opposed to relating to subject matter. For Fried, these paintings 'embodied more consistent solutions to a particular formal problem – roughly, how to make paintings in which both the pictorial structure and individual pictorial elements make explicit acknowledgement of the literal character of the picture support.'[75] We see this explicitly in how the very structure of their paintings directly relate to the edges of the picture plane in figs. 8 and 9. Fried's notion of the *viability of shape,* 'it's power to hold, to stamp itself out, and *in* [..] compelling conviction'[76], reinforces the painting or object's capacity to self-define its own boundaries. Alongside shape, we could also add such elements as height, width, breadth, weight, colour, texture, surface, material consistency, mass, and volume as formal qualities of an artwork which can be explored in determining the object's self-defining parameters. How are they held in tension with one another, do they fit, lean, rest, insert themselves into one another? Do they push against, contradict, or counterbalance one another? Is there an element of self-reflexivity that emerges in these particular traits, which determine a degree of autonomy in the artwork?

Fig. 9. Kenneth Noland, *Drought,* 1962, acrylic paint on canvas, 70 x 70 inches. Photo: Tate Gallery.

[73] Fried, p.167
[74] Fried, p.17
[75] Fried, p.24
[76] Fried, p.25

As a keen champion of paying attention to an object's presence, allure or mystery, new materialist Timothy Morton's notion of 'tuning' helps us toward an openness and receptivity to objects in their radical and irreducible fullness. 'Tuning' provides an uncomplicated way into understanding the Heideggerian concept of Dasein, translated by Morton as simply 'being there'. Morton's concept of tuning involves a re-reading of Heidegger's 'ready' and 'presence-at-hand'; two ways in which we can make ourselves aware and more conscious of the quality of being that extends out beyond the purely human. 'Ready-to-hand' are objects are that are part of the furniture, so to speak; they are around us all the time and we never normally notice them unless something happens to one of them, or they break, or they go missing. 'Presence-at-hand' is when we contemplate one of these weird things that are around us. We see something anew. Morton uses the analogy of the moment we slip and fall in the supermarket and become momentarily struck by the colour, pattern and shininess of the surface of the floor. Or perhaps it's the moment we stop and really look, really examine, a light switch. A rectangular piece of plastic jutting out from the wall, with two circular screws either side momentarily strikes us as suddenly anthropomorphic, a little cubic face nestled by the door. Perhaps it has scuffs of paint around its edges and discolouration from endless fingers pressing its nose this way and that. When we start to pay more attention to its rounded, smooth edges, the way it sits into the wall, perhaps slightly askew, its insistence grows within the space. The more we concentrate upon it, the more its presence suggests itself to us as an object we cannot fully explain.

In his critique of 'literalist' sculpture, Fried mentions how 'the largeness of [a] piece, in conjunction with its nonrelational, unitary character, *distances* the beholder – not just physically but psychically. It is, one might say, precisely this distancing that *makes* the beholder a subject and the piece in question … an object.'[77] Read through the prism of new materialism, large, isolated, unified works of art made by Minimalists typify traditional relations between subject and object, where the beholder becomes more entrenched as subject, and the artwork becomes more established as object. However, minimalist sculptor Robert Morris opens up a different reading for us in advocating for a *situation* which encompasses object and beholder:

> 'The object is but one of the terms in in the newer aesthetic. It is in some way more reflexive because one's awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships. One is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context.'[78]

[77] Fried, p.154

[78] Robert Morris, as quoted by Fried, p.153

In distancing or drawing in the beholder physically, according to scale, location and environment, a mental distancing or enticement ensues between subject and object. The shift in scale when making larger objects begins to alter the subject-object relation of artwork and beholder. Morris notes how the spatial field that exists for smaller objects diminishes the closer the viewer gets to the object[79]. A formalist description of the objects at work and at play in an encounter such as Morris' *Scatter Piece* (fig. 10) helps us understand the role of these objects more deeply in connection with their environment. When we begin to consider the space, atmosphere, energy, light, heat, and smell of the environment around the object, Morris tells us 'I wish to emphasize that things are in a space with oneself, rather than… [that] one is in a space surrounded by things us… […] '[t]he object has not become less important. It has merely become less self-important.'[80] The experience of the artwork is not merely based upon the object and a subject encountering it, instead the experience can widen to encompass a myriad of non-human elements present in the space.

Fig. 10. Robert a, *Untitled (Scatter Piece),* 1968 – 1969, felt, copper, lead, zinc, brass, aluminium, dimensions variable. Photo: The Estate of Robert Morris, ADAGP, Paris.

Claire Bishop addresses the legacy of Fried's modernist emphasis on autonomy, through its assessment of the nature of viewer interaction and participatory artworks. Fried's endorsement of autonomous and absorbed artworks can be read as a validation of a detached spectatorship, resulting in a passive

[79] Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture 1 – 3' in Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (Eds.) *Art in Theory 1900 – 2000: An* Anthology of Changing Ideas (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003) p.831
[80] Robert Morris, as quoted by Fried, p.154

engagement with artworks. This potentially leads to a lack of active engagement with artworks which might otherwise foster meaningful action and participation in viewer's social and political lives. Theatricality thus is viewed in terms of a 'live encounter between embodied actors in particular contexts'[81]; rather than a diminishment of an artwork, the theatrical becomes an essential part of the work, turning passive beholder into active participant. Such a focus on the formal aspects of artworks as championed by Fried is associated with the term aesthetic, Bishop notes, and that whilst it connotes

> 'the triple enemy of formalism, decontextualization and depoliticization; the result is that aesthetics became synonymous with the market and conservative cultural hierarchy. While these arguments were necessary to dismantle the deeply entrenched authority of the white male elites in the 1970s, today they have hardened into critical orthodoxy.'[82]

A re-reading of formalist critique then can be a useful guide to the consideration of aesthetic judgements, whilst acknowledging its limitations in terms of its historical origin and relevance to the field of participatory art. The new materialist's concern for displacing the human at the centre of all interactions with matter and material is reflected in how we rethink the beholder exists in space alongside objects. The beholder becomes one more element in an environment full of active vitalism. We can draw connections between the vitality, agency or potency of the object in new materialist parlance with the way that not only the space in a gallery, but our very being, can be controlled, changed or manipulated by the object's stature, scale and proximity to our own bodies.

[81] Bishop, p.3
[82] Bishop, p.18

1.5 Anthropomorphism

4) Anthropomorphism can enable the artwork to be an intermediary between subject and object.

Fried notes 'It is worth remarking that the 'part-by-part' and 'relational' character of most sculpture is associated by [Donald] Judd with what he calls anthropomorphism: 'A beam thrusts; a piece of iron follows a gesture; together they form a naturalistic and anthropomorphic image. The space corresponds.'[83] This 'part-by-part' or 'composed' nature of works where 'specific elements … separate from the whole, thus setting up relationships within the work'[84] was seen as anthropomorphic by Judd and Robert Morris. To other such minimalists, this greatly opposed their values of wholeness, singleness, and indivisibility. Fried in turn is wary of what he deems the negative associations of anthropomorphism: being a theatrical quality of minimalist artworks which again have too much of a concern for making too many relations to the beholder.

Fig. 11. Isa Genzken, *Elefant,* 2006, Wood, plastic tubes, plastic foils, vertical blinds, plastic toys, artificial flowers, fabric, bubble wrap, lacquer, and spray, 79 x 87 in x 39 inches. Photo: wikiart.org.

To a new materialist however, this is a multi-faceted, reflexive, and variated method of working that is more connected to working through assemblage. A sculptural approach of anthropomorphising or making relations between the human-world and non-human world, presents an opportunity to understand the active relations, differences, effects, and interactions of different matter butting up against

[83] Ibid.

[84] Donald Judd, as quoted by Fried, p.150

one another. A beam thrusts, in relation to how a block of wood leans, in relation to how a cushion sits, or wilts, in relation to how a piece of clay cups, holds, or divides… We're made more aware of the innate nature and habits of a material through assembled or constructed pieces. Isa Genzken's sculptures (fig. 11) act as a fusion between subject and object, by being both about something external in the world whilst also being suggestive of internal sensations of being in the world. We re-assess our intimacy and connection to the artwork on this basis. *Elefant* initially seems a random and chaotic balance of industrial by-products, building and packaging materials and an assortment of plastic detritus, once loved, now abandoned. Despite their diverse origins, they become integrated into a dramatic and eloquent sculptural mass. There are anthropomorphic relations to the body at work in the way the tubing leans backwards over the pedestal, one silver foot on the ground, one yellow knee raised and bent. New materialist Jane Bennett also draws our attention to anthropomorphism as a way of widening our perceptions to the vastness of differing material properties around us, whilst also connecting us more fully to them:

> 'In a vital materialism, an anthropomorphic element in perception can uncover a whole world of resonances and resemblances- sounds and sights that echo and bounce far more than would be possible were the universe to have a hierarchical structure. We at first may see only a world in our own image, but what appears next is a swarm of 'talented' and vibrant materialities (including the seeing self).'[85]

One of the ways we relate with nonhuman things is through anthropomorphising them, and whilst this may be ultimately human-centred, or human-oriented, its effects include re-assessment, intimacy and closer relation to the object in question. Nevertheless, anthropomorphism still remains a human-oriented framework of perceiving and understanding the world; we are still imbuing objects which qualities that they may or may not have.

The tendency of some makers to anthropomorphise through their work, however, reveals a limitation to new materialist subject – object relations. Under a new materialist lens, if we are to flatten the role maker to another object as Graham Harman suggests[86], what does such a statement mean for an artist? To simply negate the role of maker to another object seems untenable when considering Gell's understanding of agency, as a maker falls under a primary category of agents. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek further posits that the subject being equal to an object is not such a straightforward ontological flattening as Harman makes out[87]. The idea of

[85] Bennett, p.99

[86] 'All objects must be given equal attention, whether they be human, non-human, natural, cultural, real or fictional.' Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Pelican, 2018) p.9

[87] 'In this sense, the subject is indeed an object, as the new materialists and realists claim, but a very particular, very peculiar kind of object, a strange object that, insofar as it is *in the subject more than the subject itself*, is constitutive of subjectivity as such.' Russell Sbriglia & Slavov Žižek, 'Introduction:

'subject' is much more complex, open, fractured, and fragmented than merely being another object. The distinction between subject and object is a necessary one, in order to account for the holes, voids, and gaps in the subject itself. As Russell Sbriglia points out in the podcast *Žižek and So On,*

> 'Subjectivity does not equal the human being. The subject names an object that isn't just an object among others […] Subject stands for the eruption of a dimension that is inhuman. It is in excess of human beings […] Subject is a virtual entity that radically plasticizes 'human being', that drives the human being.'[88]

The term 'subject' cannot be used interchangeably with human being or human consciousness, or even perception. It is the relation of the subject and object that needs further exploration, not the negation or flattening of the subject. It is not just objects who have a withdrawn, inaccessible core to them, but it is *all* of reality that is subject to this condition, including the subject. The new materialist plea to return to an enchanted, naïve connection with objects (see Bennett's *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (2001) and Harman's *Tool Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (2002)) has been referred to as 'Hobbit Materialism' by Žižek, who is suspicious of its tendencies to fall into a type of quasi-spiritual mysticism or religion; a subjective realism, but without subjects[89].

Both Harman and Bennett's approaches are also argued by Benjamin Boysen as being 'semiophobic': having 'a deep discomfort and unease with human indebted-and embeddedness in a semiotic reality.' [90] Finally, and perhaps one of the most challenging criticisms levelled at new materialism is from Andrew Cole, Professor of English at Princeton University. In drawing the connection between a new materialist call to materiality, and what he terms 'commodity fetishism in academic form', Cole questions the approach of mystifying the character of the commodity as this ends up personifying the object, and therefore ignoring the greater significance of the historical process that 'makes a commodity a commodity, an object an object, and capitalism capitalism.' [91] Whilst the example of Jane Bennett's assemblage of mundane things found in the street sewer such as a bottle cap, a dead rat, and a broom handle may help us rethink the relations between us and materiality, the assemblage remains a problem that becomes aestheticized in academia.

Subject Matters' from Russell Sbriglia & Slavov Žižek (Eds.) *Subject Lessons: Hegel, Lacan and the Future of Materialism* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020) p. 11

[88] Russell Sbriglia, Episode 19 "Žižek and So On – The Subject Supposed to Object?" (2020) [accessed 17/04/22] Starting at 28 minutes, 57 seconds

[89] Benjamin Boysen, 'The Embarrassment of Being Human: A Critique of New Materialism and Object-Oriented Ontology', *Orbis Literrarum*, 73(3) (2018), pp. 225- 242 (p.232)

[90] Boysen, p.226

[91] Andrew Cole, 'Those Obscure Objects of Desire', *Artforum,* 53(10) (2015), pp. 318-23 (p.323)

It is the increasingly fragmented, distant and complex relationship of subject to object that we need to account for from a new materialist perspective in the arts, not a mere flattening out of the subject. A way of articulating this complex correspondence between subject and object as a maker is through what art critic Susan Rosenberg describes as an anthropomorphic 'physicality as that which makes experience and thought intelligible'[92]. In sculptor Jilaine Jones' *She is like her Children* (fig. 12) we see a coming together of bodily metaphor, architectural maquette, and operative machine, in a series of hydrostone blocks which link and touch one another, suspended from thin steel frames. Another form stands separated from the rest, as if occupying the space of beholder in the sculpture, acting as both viewer and artist. Here exists a sculptural object which mediates between 'an internally experienced physicality and an external, objective measuring of movement'[93].

Fig. 12. Jilaine Jones, *She is Like Her Children,* 2005, steel, hydrostone, 22 x 18 x 5 inches. Photo: OKCreative, New Haven, CT.

[92] Rosenberg, p.3
[93] Ibid.

Fig. 13. Jilaine Jones, *Wonder World,* 2006, steel, concrete, Rockboard, 144 x 48 x 94 inches. Photo: Tim Nighswander.

Likewise in *Wonder World* (fig. 13) a series of concrete and steel blocks interconnect in vertical, diagonal and horizontal movements indicate the bodily sensations of a human model getting up from a seated position, walking forwards and placing herself within an architectural frame. The work articulates the phenomenon of inner hydraulic movements of the body and its corresponding changes in weight and mass, using an abstracted language of sculptural metaphors. The properties of such heavy, dense, cold, and hard materials seem in contradiction to the sensitivities and nuances of subjective, internal experiences. As Rosenberg notes, *Wonder World* 'objectifies this empathic fluctuation between sensations of distance and interiority, and the undermining of boundaries between artist, object, and viewer'[94].

[94] Rosenberg, p.2

1.6 Conclusions

In revisiting Fried's *Art and Objecthood*, three approaches to reading an artwork hold significant value to the new materialist: relationality, presence, and anthropomorphism. These notions provide us with a set of guiding principles on which to determine how and where autonomy and agency arise in artworks. Through material assemblages, we can see how meaning is not necessarily found in the monumentality of one object, but in the combination and relationality of things. A radical reorienting of subject-object relations, and a shift in our understanding of what things can possess agential capacity therefore arises through the speculative joining together of disparate materials. In 'tuning' into the presence of objects, we attune ourselves to the oddness and liveliness of materials. Realising the subtle power that lies behind the open-endedness of 'things' helps objects to retain their autonomous edge, releasing them from continuous correlation to human-oriented frameworks. Through consideration of the space and distance around an object, we also see how an artwork can place demands on the space and the viewer that issue from its own objective existence. The tendency towards anthropomorphising things poses a complex set of problems in this project. Whilst anthropomorphism still remains a human-oriented framework of perceiving and understanding the world, it provides us with a way of talking about what exists beyond the solely human realm. In a sculptural sense, it provides an open space where non-human and human things can meet, mix and melt into one another. It is an ambiguous space where the two apparently distinct fields of subject and object begin to blur. We need to go beyond the polarisation between imagination and reality, as Tim Ingold argues[95]. We can allow for the vast acres of wordless creativity and imagination that arise through making practices to function as a stage for what lies beyond subject-object parameters.

At the very root of Fried's championing of formalism that is apparent within *Art and Objecthood* lies the apparent gulf between absorption (which arises in relation to parts of the artwork to each other) and theatricality (which arises in relation to the artwork with the viewer). It is the relations between parts of the artwork to themselves that a formalist critique, at least initially, offers to the new materialist. What we see in a formalist critique by Fried in 1967 is continued in Harman's explorations of formalism in *Art and Objects* in 2020: the identity of the (object) artwork and beholder (subject) becoming entangled, intermingling and fluidly exchanging roles in relation with one another. Rather than identifying the human as sole privileged beholder of an artwork, both Fried's formalism and Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology identify the human being as simply another ingredient that makes up a work of art. The autonomy of the artwork can be assured despite the need for a beholder.

[95] Tim Ingold, *Imagining for Real: Essays on creation, attention and correspondence* (Oxford: Routledge, 2022) p.4

Chapter 2: Painting and Agency

2.1 Can a painting be a subject?

In the previous chapter, we discussed the idea of what agency can mean particularly in relation to objects and sculpture. We also saw how certain considerations of the formal properties of artworks, such as presence, scale, relationality and anthropomorphic qualities, can help us to draw out agential characteristics of materials and objects. How does the notion of agency change in relation to painting? In this chapter, we examine the potential agential capacities of painting. This means exploring paintings in their potential to generate self-reflexivity, and affect change through their indexical nature, meaning the way that the meanings of paintings change according to their surroundings and who's looking at them. We will be examining the ideas of Isabelle Graw in particular, Professor of Art History and Art Theory at the Städelschule, in Frankfurt, publisher of the journal Texte zur Kunst which began in 1990, and founder of Institute for Art Criticism with Daniel Birnbaum. Graw takes up the notion of self-reflexivity in painting in *Thinking through Painting: Reflexivity and Agency beyond the Canvas* (2012) and *Painting beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition* (2016). She suggests that paintings in effect can become 'quasi-persons', in that 'they appear as avatars capable of acting and thinking on their genuine terms – and producing a surplus of value of reflexivity'[96]. Through her conversation with fellow art historian Peter Geimer, several issues arise in the attempt to identify what agency actually means in this particular context. Firstly, what is the difference between self-reflexive and self-referential? Secondly, in what way are paintings actually acting with 'agency'? It is undoubtable that artworks act in the sense of prompting reflection, physical and emotional responses and affecting us, 'without articulating an autonomous will in doing so.'[97] But do they actually make contact with us, as Graw suggests? Does a painting ultimately have the intellectual powers of a subject, and if so, what implications does this have for artists?

The start of this chapter will explore this idea of painterly self-reflexivity through the notion of art historian Hanneke Grootenboer's 'pensive' images, and then Graw's writings. Semi-abstract paintings by American painter Philip Guston (1913 – 1980) will initially locate painting's reflexivity in a modernist era, with the works of more contemporary painters Amy Sillman and Luc Tuymans providing more recent voices to the question of self-referential painting. Installations by contemporary painters Katharina Grosse and Jessica Stockholder provide recent examples of works categorised in the expanded field of painting, which give us clues as to how the life of a painting can operate as a subject alongside being an object. Objects acting as three-

[96] André Rottman, 'Introduction: Remarks on Contemporary Painting's Perseverance' in Graw, I., Birnbaum, D., & Hirsch, N. *Thinking through Painting: Reflexivity and Agency beyond the Canvas* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), p.13

[97] Peter Geimer, 'Responses to Isabelle Graw' in Graw, et al. (2012), p.41

dimensional brush strokes, which serve to both reinforce a painterly organisation of material and object, can also disrupt the flat reading of a painting, pointing to the dense network of semiotic relations that belong to the painting.

2.2 Pensive images: paintings as thinking-beings

Just a year before Fried wrote *Art and Objecthood,* in her essay entitled *Against Interpretation* Susan Sontag declared:

> 'interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there […] Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all.'[98]

Rather than 'squeezing content' out of things, can we open ourselves up to what we encounter in a more inquisitive, open way. Stepping away from interpretation of content, a moderate formalist reading of a painting provides us with such questions as 'how has the work been made or constructed? What different elements make up the work, in what way, in what order? What can the work tell me about itself through what particular arrangements of forms, shapes, colours, lines, and surface qualities it has?' Hanneke Grootenboer's *The Pensive Image* (2020) proposes an alternative to interpretation by arguing that painting is a mode of thinking, and is 'capable of offering us a thought, rather than a meaning or a narrative'[99]. Through her examination of 17th century Dutch still life, the study of hieroglyphs, and reproductions of ancient Greek statues, she offers us a chance to reflect on the wider ramification of an artwork as a mode of thinking, not merely as a product which narrates stories or creates a singular, specific meaning. Grootenboer's analysis coincides with a formalist critique which refuses to reduce the artwork to mere interpretation: 'Artworks no longer wait patiently to be interpreted by knowledgeable critics or scholars; they are now considered to be actively contributing to our experiences, anticipating our approaches or intervening in our actions.'[100]

Grootenboer argues that this does not mean images which are necessarily clever or intelligent, or which show the idea or concept of thinking itself, but that certain images are 'thoughtful', or self-conscious themselves[101]. The pensive image doesn't *produce* anything but is instead a catalyst for meandering thought, indicating the artwork's potential, actant, and dynamic capacity. The pensive image doesn't offer

[98] Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation' in *Against Interpretation & Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966) p.13 - p14.
[99] Hanneke Grootenboer, *The Pensive Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020) p.2
[100] Grootenboer, p.7
[101] Grootenboer, p.9

a textual response, but often remains aloof, indetermined and nebulous. What is being transmitted through a painting is not solely what is represented, what is seen, and what is known. What is being transmitted is more than visual representation, it is also the non-rational, non-linear negative space that signs also signify. What arises in the painting seems to be able to articulate the seeming paradox of the representation of illegibility, imperceptibility and indeterminacy. In Philip Guston's *Head I* (fig. 14) Each horizontal and vertical mark situates itself in a fabricated, tentative space, opening up an unstable yet seemingly solid dimension within the painting. Tracings of previous tones and marks indicates the shifting position of the head in space, as finally we are left with the remnants and tracings of an unsettled image. In refraining his paintings from 'vanishing into recognition'[102], *Head I* 'hovers on the brink, hovers like a fog over the landscape and veers one way, then another and won't settle… it's won its freedom from inertia' [103].

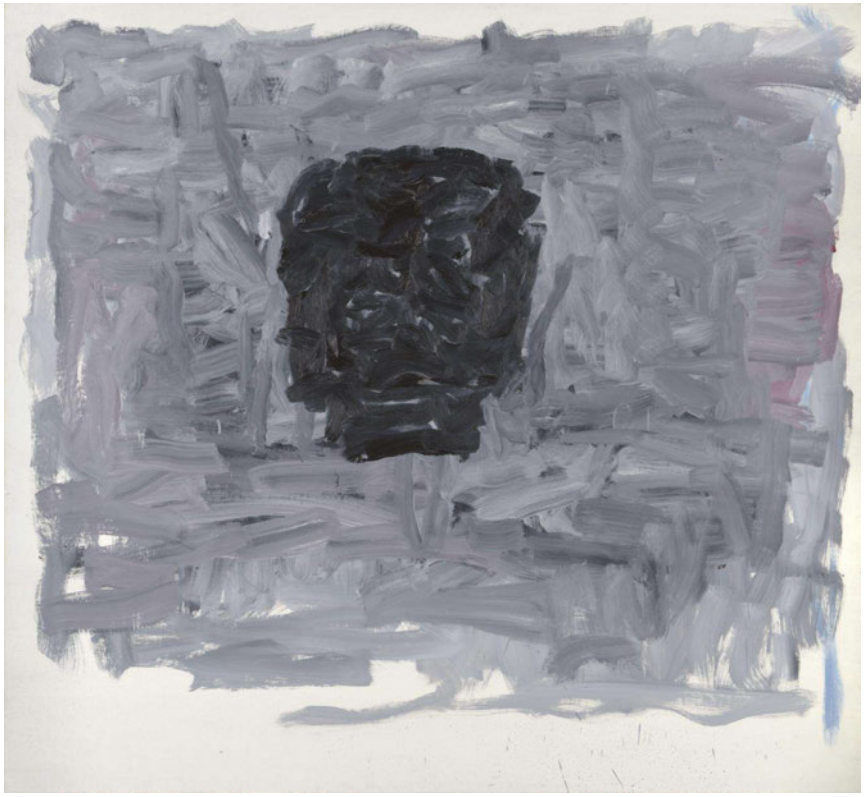

Fig. 14. Philip Guston, *Head I,* 1965, oil on canvas, 71 x 77 inches. Photo: Tate Galleries.

When a painter stops painting, a thing that has been created by them now stands before them, apart from them, 'finished'. The final form the painting takes is an embodiment of the acts of ruminating, responding and pulling together disparate

[102] Philip Guston, *Collected Writings, Lectures and Conversations* (California: University of California Press, 2010) p.42
[103] Guston, p.49

thoughts, connections and feelings in relation to subject matter. We are able to see traces that build on rather than erase previous marks throughout the painting's history and encompasses the passage of time in its very fabric and mark. Simultaneously, painting also provides a way of working that, according to Guston, 'eliminates the time between thinking and doing'[104]. The resulting painting is a locus for the dialogue between artist and their own education, history and identity, as well as the cultural condition they find themselves in and its legacy. The separation that comes after the determination of it being 'finished' determines it to be a thing that is leading its own life, something that stands on its own two feet as a proposition in the world.

Fig. 15. Amy Sillman, *South Street,* 2021, oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 inches. Photo: Capitain Petzel.

The art and writing of another American abstract painter, Amy Sillman (b. 1955) continues the dynamic and messy relationships to Abstract Expressionism, albeit one in which she occasionally 'breaks up' with Abstract Expressionism[105]. Incorporating

[104] Guston, p.43

[105] 'I've been feeling like kind of confused for a long time, like years. I'm friends with all of A's friends and stuff, and I think A's really cool, and I totally learned a LOT from A – but you know what? I don't want to say anything bad about A, but I have to TOTALLY MOVE ON with my LIFE.' Amy Sillman, *Faux Pas*: *Selected Writings and Drawings* (Paris: After 8 Books, 2022) p.175

suggestions of text, illustrative lines associated with comics, goofy shapes and intuitive painterly smears and gestures, her paintings represent an intersection between the legacy of Abstract Expressionism in gestural painting and post-1970's feminist painting alongside painters Elizabeth Murray, Pat Steir and Sylvia Plimack Mangold[106]. *South Street* (fig. 15) is made up of marks, lines, and painterly gestures, layered on top of each other. Improvisation is key to this process, 'a conscientious reminder of how fragile everything is, how unstable and unknowable'[107]. The incoherence that exudes from the canvas is essential to its liveliness, both content and form being what Sillman describes as 'weird informed excess'[108]. We see here how both abstract and figurative painting possess the capacity to talk about the very elusive character of their being.

Grootenboer borrows the term 'pensive' from Roland Barthes' description in *Camera Lucida* (1980) of a photograph that doesn't immediately excite, repel or alarm a beholder but instead seems to actively think, to be *pensive*[109]. Similar to Graham Harman's OOO, Grootenboer argues the case for the beholder to be an active component in an encounter of the artwork, in that our experiences and responses begin to 'add' to the artwork when we come across it. Confusions on the origins of thought and the embodiment of these ideas arises, when '[w]e aren't sure whether the thoughts we found are in our own heads or in the painting.'[110] It is not that drawings, sculptures or paintings necessarily 'think' themselves, but are constructed in such a way that contain thought. Thought here can indicate the various nuanced associations of what 'thought' entails: multiple, complex, interrelated, and sequential or non-sequential reflections, ideas, concepts, references and imaginings that lead to other such ideas or concepts. This uncertainty or indeterminacy in locating thoughts and the imagination is central to the expansive idea of new materialist thought, and is what makes the consideration of agency in painting so significant: when we no longer assume that affect, imagination, thought and emotion are purely human constructs and qualities, our relationship with the world and the things we encounter in it becomes more meaningful and profound. Tim Ingold summarises the significance of this shift in rethinking the direction of flow between thinking human and creation:

> 'It is to think of creation not as the realisation of an image but as a way of imagining for real, that is generative at once of things and of the ideas by which we come to know them. Creation, then, is not an outward expression of creativity but harbours its own impulse of growth and renewal.'[111]

[106] Sillman, p.37
[107] Sillman, p.152
[108] Sillman, p.152
[109] Grootenboer, p.6
[110] Ibid.
[111] Ingold, Imagining for Real, p.5

Painting can be thought of as thinking in movement, as Ingold notes, where 'to think is to be caught up in a dynamic flow; thinking is, by its very nature, kinetic'[112]. We see the process of intuitive decision-making unfold through painterly marks. The development of the painting itself provides an open, questioning channel of communication between artist and subject matter, as it forms sequences of visual inquiries, translations and commentaries. Grootenboer notices how paintings are not only places for us to dwell, but also 'provide a metaphor for mental processes – an image of the spatiality of thought – by which thinking can be visualized as much as activated.'[113] A brushstroke moving, covering, touching, through moments of colour which suggest a loose correlation with a thing-out-in-the-world. These varying strokes and patches, records and reflections of items all affect one another, the coloured brushmarks themselves reading as indicators of both internal and external generativities of visibility[114]. In reference to Cézanne's paintings (fig. 16), Coole notes how patches of colour shift, hover and resonate next to another, creating 'subtle identities and differences that allow a painting to break the 'skin of things' and show them emerging into visibility.'[115] The process of drawing and painting allow us to break the contours between things, and instead generate a scene that is held together through sensations of atmosphere and light. Alfred Gell also observed how abstract art also shifts our perception of internal agency within the artwork, noticing how '[p]atches of colour seem to whirl around, hover, clash and fragment as if they had internal sources of energy and were engaged in complex causal interrelations.'[116] If we consider these interrelationships and forces as having causal interactions themselves, we can see how these 'produce agency in the physical body of the index itself, so that it becomes a 'living thing' without recourse to the imitation of any living thing.'[117] The practice of painting thus becomes a transgressive performance in connecting subject and object through action. It is a mode of pre-cognitive, pre-verbal communication that opens up correspondence between maker and material.

[112] Tim Ingold, quoting Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013) p.98
[113] Grootenboer, p.79
[114] Coole, New Materialisms, p.105
[115] Ibid.
[116] Gell, p.43
[117] Gell, p.76

Fig. 16. Paul Cézanne, *Mont Saint Victoire,* 1902 - 1906, oil on canvas, 22 x 38 inches. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Fine Art.

2.3 Can a painting project thoughts?

A painting can elucidate many things at once, including simultaneously portray the process of perceiving and a representation of perception, but how does that relate to the concept of agency? Is a painting really a self-acting thing which operates as its own physical discourse producer? Isabelle Graw argues the case for paintings as vitalist projections, in the sense that paintings can project thoughts. Her argument follows a line of thinking that includes ideas of Louis Marin, Georges Didi-Huberman, and Hubert Damisch, namely that 'painting is a sort of discourse producer that arrives at its own insights' which becomes 'subject- like' in its capacity for autonomous thinking[118]. What does 'arriving at an insight' mean in this context? By examining the figurative work of Luc Tuymans and Jutta Koether, we can begin to unfold some modes of painting, such as their indexicality and transitivity, which help us further explore the notion of agency in painting.

Fig. 17. Luc Tuymans, *Der Architekt,* 1997, oil on canvas, 43 x 55 inches. Photo: Frieze Gallery.

Not only is the faceless figure, fallen in the snow, anonymous in Luc Tuyman's *Der Architekt* (fig. 17), the manner in which the painting has been made is also anonymous. A muted, neutral and pale palette, the blank, undetailed white of the figure's surroundings, and seemingly one, thin, transparent layer of oil paint covering

[118] Graw, 'The Value of Painting: Notes on Unspecificity, Indexicality, and Highly Valuable Quasi-Persons' in Graw et al. (2012), p.54

the entire surface of the canvas initially seem to mirror the removed, indifferent eye of the camera. The way in which the painting is painted speaks of the fallacies surrounding its own objectivity; it projects representation, perception and obfuscation of meaning whilst also explicitly communicating the fact it is a painting. Geimer, however, observes 'a direct connection between the extremely reduced, wan, emptied appearance of [Tuymans'] paintings and the discursive force of the historical subjects they engage.'[119] The blurring lines between openness and obfuscation make a difficult path to tread as a cultural reader of paintings. The more reduced, empty and pale the paintings seem to appear, the more analysis, content and meaning we seek in them. 'Arriving at its own insights' may therefore mean 'capable of generating ideas, theories and concepts' in a way that challenges the normative ways that humans apply theories to objects.

We may understand the experience of engaging with a painting instead through the lexicon of signs that present themselves through mark-making. These signs, Graw tells us, 'possess the *physical* power of a pointing finger'[120]; they suggest the subjectivity of the present-yet-absent artist, through the material processes which leave tracings of subjectivity, but also indicate meaning that is beyond what is shown. Graw's focus on the indexical nature of painting indicates its capacity to be self-actualizing. She explores how Jutta Koether's *Hot Rod* (fig. 18) explicitly visualises not only the wide-ranging network that it belongs to, but also the behaviour of objects within a particular network. Through what David Joselit terms their *transitivity*[121], paintings can identify their various contextual translations both physically in the space (Koether's painting is suspended midway between being 'on stage' on a platform in the gallery, and 'off-stage') and figuratively within the language of the paint itself (the brushstrokes which interpret *Poussin's Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* from 1651). *Hot Rod* seems to enact Diana Coole's assertion that 'painting is a fold; it expresses the 'reflexivity of the sensible', whereby it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted'[122]. The legacy of the life of this object and its shifting meanings and values seemed less indicative of a static object, subjected to meanings imposed on to it, and more of a moving, dynamic entity which mirrors back different aspects of how it belongs to a world of unstable meanings and diverse impacts. We see how a painting's agency is embedded into the dense network of indexical relations that it operates in. In the following section, we can begin to unravel how the relation between painting and object heightens and intensifies this dynamic.

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[119] Geimer, 'Painting and atrocity', in Graw et al. (2012), p.25

120 Graw, 'The Value of Liveliness: Painting as an Index of Agency in the New Economy' in Graw, I. & Lajer-Burcharth, E. *Painting beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016) p.80

[121] David Joselit, 'Painting Beside Itself' *October* (130) (Autumn, 2009) pp. 125–134 (p.128)

[122] Coole, New Materialisms, p.104

Fig. 18. Jutta Koether, *Hot Rod (After Poussin),* 2009, acrylic, pastel and mixed media on canvas 80 X 104 inches. Photo: Farzad Owrang.

2.4 The expanded field of painting

We are currently in an era where we have seen the trajectory of painting progress well beyond the boundaries of medium specificity. The works of Jessica Stockholder and Katharina Grosse demonstrated in the late 1990s and early 2000s that not only was 'painting' no longer related solely to pursuits in two-dimensions, but that the physical act of colouring a surface was also no longer necessary to its definition. Bringing objects into connection with painting has a varied history across the 20th century alone, ranging from Francis Picabia's inclusion of a toy monkey in his tongue-in-cheek *Natures Mortes* in 1920, to Robert Rauschenberg's crows, tyres, umbrellas and beds in his paintings from the 60's and 70's, to Ebony G Patterson's densely packed, cascading material tapestries (fig. 19). Bringing the everyday, the mundane, the peculiar, the bizarre in three-dimensional form, no matter how small, into the realm of a two-dimensional painting breaks the illusion of its self-contained, otherworldly space. We are confronted by the collision of these two worlds. What does this expansion in painting mean for autonomy within an artistic context? And can a formalist reading of painting installations further delineate notions of agency within the field of painting?

Fig. 19. Ebony G. Patterson, …*when the land is in plumage…*(2020), glitter, glue, beads, plaster, conch shells, gold leaf, porcelain, paint, trimmings, jewellery, embellishments, fabric, jacquard tapestry, and paraffin wax, 108 x 196.8 x 123.6 inches. Photo: courtesy Monique Meloche Gallery.

In the case of Stockholder's work, (fig. 20) we can see how colour can establish equivalencies between the volumes and spaces that are created in each component of the sculpture. We can see how objects might relate or disconnect from one another through their colour. Colour is primary to the structure of her sculptures and installations, allocating an identity to particular objects that both support an overall image and therefore work against the three-dimensional qualities of the objects themselves. We see objects as objects in their own right, but we also see an overall design of colour and shape next to one another. Katharina Grosse's green spray paint (fig. 21) works to support the idea of the painting whilst also confusing the three-dimensional nature of the space. The shimmering colour seems to create the illusion of a hole, a recessed square in the architecture. We become aware of the power of colour to create the illusion of form, and we are reminded of the shimmering transparent layers of colour that evoke particular spaces in Mark Rothko's paintings. We can see passages and sequences of colour sprayed onto walls with a spray gun as a direct action, indications of the strength, power and weight of colours in connection with one another. It is optical, but it is indicative of space, distance, scale, atmosphere and therefore links to our embodied experience of the space.

Fig. 20. Jessica Stockholder, *Lay of the Land*, 2014, Installation view; orange plastic shopping baskets, driveway mirrors, oriental carpet, wooden stools, acrylic paint, pendant lights and bulbs, hardware; 108 x 135 x 138 inches. Photo: Gert-Jan Van Rooij.

Fig. 21. Katharina Grosse, *One Floor Up More Highly,* 2010, Styrofoam, acrylic on wall, floor, soil and reinforced plastic, 307 x 661 x 3251 inches. Photo: Art Evens.

Finding and incorporating industrially made things, already coloured, and working with them as three-dimensional brush strokes constitute as 'painting' in this expanded field. We can see this in instances where a medium possesses the capacity to address issues that have been traditionally ascribed only to a particular medium (for instance photography addressing ambiguities between representational and abstract painting). Barry Schwabsky notes

> '[a] painting is not only a painting but also the representation of an idea about painting […] the painting is not there to represent the image; the image exists in order to represent the painting (that is, the painting's idea of painting'[123].

In other words, the drive behind creating a physical object 'a painting' is in its reference to the verb 'painting.' This widening of the concept of what 'painting' entails is critical to our understanding of the idea of self-reflexive painting, as it is through these spatial and formal changes to the nature of painting that the process, the verb 'painting', really comes to the fore. The term self-reflexive in painting denotes the artwork's capacity to reflect upon its own inherent nature, its processes, and the very

[123] Barry Schwabsky, 'Painting in the Interrogative Mode' in *Vitamin 3: New Perspectives in Painting* (London: Phaidon Press, 2002) p.8

medium of the painting itself. The self-reflexivity of a painting makes us aware of what a painting actually is physically, on its own particular terms, and as such has an introspective quality which invites viewers to consider the formal elements of the work, material processes and the creative act itself. Self-referential meanwhile suggests the painting's ability to refer to itself in relation to external contexts, content and narratives.

2.5 The limits of vital materialism in relation to painting

In 1982, art historian Michael Podro wrote 'I cannot look at anything and know where my mind's contribution to its qualities ends and the qualities that belong to it in itself begin.'[124] How can we ever tell where the power of images end, and our imaginative projections begin? In a similar vein, Matthew Rampley, Research Fellow at the Institute of Art History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague notes the lack of conceptual analysis of agency and affect in the arts, despite their increased popularity, suggesting that '[a]dvocates of expanded notions of agency fail to offer an alternative theory of agency. They merely seek to extend the range of objects that can be considered to be agents.'[125] Even Graw herself acknowledges the limitations of a vitalist stance:

> 'The problem with vitalistic scenarios is their total failure to take the influence of external social and economic factors into account. They claim an independent development within a context (the capitalist economy) that is in fact strongly governed by pressure to conform and submit to social forces. In such a situation, the vitalistic ideal of independent elaboration proves to be mere wishful thinking, albeit a form of wishful thinking that is hugely appealing.'[126]

What emerges here is a double bind: an acknowledgement that whilst a wider understanding of what 'agency' may help us to question our perceived boundaries and differences between subject and object, there are particular limitations that a vitalist materialism brings to the historical and contextual work of painters.

At first glance, the limits of vital materialism coincide with the limitations of a formalist critique of the art object. In emphasising the significance of material agency, we run the risk of downplaying human intentionality, cultural, historical and societal factors in the creation and reading of art. This poses certain challenges to the maker through the potential neglect of the role of artist in making artwork. As we will see in chapter four at a residency in Musselburgh, images of pipes spilling over one another out in the surrounding woodland are some of the most compelling examples of seeing materiality in action, but what where does that leave the painter? British artist Tim Knowles' Tree Drawings (fig. 22) are created through a collaboration with drawing materials, surfaces, the branches of the tree and the wind, where the board in effect collects the 'signature' of the tree, and the shifting motions and still moments caused by the wind. Whilst the natural elements of tree and wind are clearly part of the

[124] Rampley, p.13
[125] Rampley, p.19
[126] Isabelle Graw, Exhibition Text, 'Notes on the Exhibition The Vitalist Economy of Painting', paragraph 7, 2018, https://www.galerieneu.net/exhibition/the-vitalist-economy-of-painting [accessed 06/05/2023]

collaboration, they are still serving the human aim of producing a drawing, and being subjected to predetermined human-oriented parameters.

Fig. 22. Tim Knowles, *Tree Drawing – Larch on Easel #1 [4 pens],* 2005, larch tree, pens, paper, board, easel, dimensions variable. Photo: Tim Knowles.

Whilst some may appreciate the directness and simplicity of the drawings, there is a degree of one-dimensionality and predictability in these outcomes. The drawings will be made of similar marks and strokes, unintentional by design and unfettered by artistic consideration. Is there a conceptual shallowness at play here, in that the works lack any layered or nuanced meaning? What you see is what you get. Whilst this may be considered an example of illustrating the liveliness and agency of nature at work, does this leave the artist outside of any active role in the artwork, apart from the overseer of the project? This clear relationship between process and outcome may be a hindrance to Graw's notion of independent elaboration of materiality, whereby an aspect of the agency of a painting may conceal the very conditions that made a painting possible, or in Graw's words: 'The vitalistic signals in art prevent us from perceiving the work that went into it.'[127]

The version of formalism that this project advocates is a moderate one. The formalism associated with Greenberg and Fried seems time-bound to the 1960's, and as we have so far discovered, there is a flawed inconsistency behind the championing of selected artworks made by a small circle of 'chosen ones' at the expense of similar

[127] Graw, Notes on the Exhibition, paragraph 5

works by others at the same time. Yet the close attention paid to paintings and sculptures gained through formalist analysis holds significance for the new materialist working in the arts today. An understanding of formalist elements gives the beholder a scaffolding on to which they can account for the ways in which an artwork is constructed. This project also endorses a formalism which pushes back on the increasing demands of artworks to be either philosophically, ethically or morally virtuous. An example here is the work of Pamela Rosenkranz (fig. 23), who works (amongst many materials) with chemical compounds such as silicone, Viagra, biotin and bacteria. Spaces and rooms in the Swiss Pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale were filled with flesh-coloured liquids, green lights which blurred boundaries between inside and outside, and the smell of a baby's skin. Curated by art historian Susanne Pfeffer, these elements were intended to stir viewer's biological processes and innate responses to stimuli, posing questions about what it means to be a human[128]. Art writer for Frieze Quinn Latimer remarks upon the lofty aims of Rosenkranz's work, observing how:

> 'Rosenkranz appears to be distinctly interested in travelling beyond the identity-centred concerns that often gird visual art and towards more non-human-centric and ecological concerns. At the same time, her works explore the very myth-ridden themes the elements, the politics of purity, the mind and body separation, consumerism - that define human existence.'[129]

Graham Harman's call to not overmine or undermine objects in his theory of objects emerges here. In support of a moderate formalism, we are asked not to explain away an artwork by breaking it down into smaller, component parts, nor to paraphrase or explain away objects through what they do, rather than what they are. In this sense the materiality of the work is in danger of being duomined through such art criticism, rather than being recognised for its surprising material qualities and ranges of colour. As Pfeffer notes, 'thinking a universe beyond humanity and conceptualizing matter as inherently intelligible are among the urgent tasks of our present'[130], but is this all that constitutes the work of art? We need the wild ugliness of art to remain ideologically unaestheticized and unsanitized, for the fucked-upness, nonsensical, whimsical, and diabolical, the silly, outrageous to remain. Not only does this project endorse a positive renewal of formalism, but also a revitalisation of the formless: the unverifiable, the non-hierarchized, the non-categorizable. Recognition

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[128] Andrea Chin, 'Pamela Rosenkranz fills Swiss Pavilion with immaterial elements at Venice Biennale 2015' (2015) paragraph 2 https://www.designboom.com/art/swiss-pavilion-venice-biennale-2015-pamela-rosenkranz-05-08-2015/ [accessed 03/02/2024]

[129] Quinn Latimer, 'Pamela Rosenkranz' (2011) paragraph 5 https://www.frieze.com/article/pamela-rosenkranz [accessed 03/02/2024]

[130] Pfeffer, quoted by Chin, paragraph 7

of the non-categorizable and the non-hierarchized in cultural environments provide examples of challenging conventional power structures and established norms, as well as the embracing of diversity through resisting over-simplifications. In this sense, a formalist and new materialist approach can co-exist, through acting as strategies which undermine the ways that explain away artworks, despite being at times oppositional poles to how we read, understand and assimilate art.

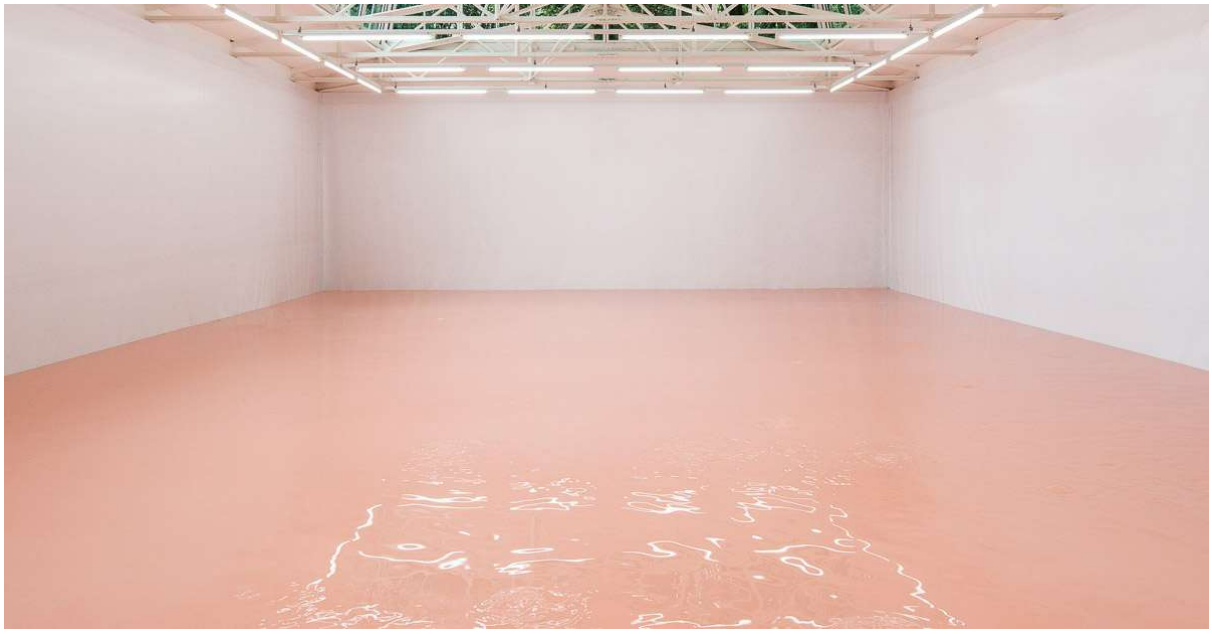

Fig. 23. Pamela Rosencranz, *Our Product*, 2015, Installation shot, Swiss Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale. Photo: Marc Asekhame.

Is a vital materialist stance fundamentally at odds with a painter who prioritises formal concerns of colour, shape and composition then? Not necessarily so, as can be seen in a series of small 'oil' paintings by Scottish artist Susie Johnston (figs 24). In these two paintings, crude oil sourced from Scotland, has been slowly and painstakingly thinned with solvent to arrive at a thick, viscose material, just about able to lie flat on its support of a wooden frame, and left to coagulate and thicken into a painterly 'medium'. The medium itself is not only 'alive', in terms of being unstable, volatile, and subject to change depending on how long the pieces are maintained upright (the oil ends up sliding down the surface of the board) but is also one of the world's most contentious materials. How do we read such a material, with its connotations of earthly exploitation, extraction and embeddedness in our daily lives, alongside the subtle and gentle inclusions of silvery pigment, delicately swirling across its surface? It seems these two aspects of painting sit alongside each other in tension within the one piece, where the worldly material discourse of painterly medium can sit in tandem with the historical traditions of painterly surface material, colour, shape and texture.

Fig. 24. Susie Johnston, *Unless + Terra,* 2023, crude oil, oil paint, wood, 8 x 8 inches.

2.6 Conclusions

In answering the question of whether a painting ultimately has the intellectual powers of a subject, it suffices to say that a painting does not possess the intellectual and cognitive faculties of a human or sentient being, and so cannot be considered to have the same capacities as a subject in a biological sense. However, the power, complexity, and relationality of a painting as it is bound up in a variety of cultural, historical and societal networks coincides with a new materialist lens of rethinking the passivity of materials, material processes and co-authorship between human, organic and non-organic substances. What we could say instead is that a painting shares the same indexical constructs that a subject has: the meaning, significance, and impact that they both carry varies from situation to situation and is context- and environment-dependent. Whilst a painting isn't a moving, breathing, sentient animal with a conscience, with the help of authors such as Graw, Grootenboer and Ingold, we can see how thought is located both in paintings, in the materials themselves, and outwith the human beholder. The two terms 'self-reflexive' and 'self-referential', despite being slightly different in emphasis, provide a good grounding to considering how agency is at play within a painting, as they indicate this multi-faceted, dynamic exchange that arise through the creation of paintings.

For many artists interested in new materialist discourses, this means that we are much more of an active participant in a collaborative co-creation of events, that reach far beyond a 'painter-paints-painting' direction of impetus. Instead, it is a process of opening and joining up with the already-happening dynamic processes of perception, that is not a one-way energy exchange. This moves us away from traditionally individualist, author-based notions of painting, as artists such as Tim Knowles exemplify; those who arguably collaborate with the natural elements to produce artworks. And what about a painter whose interest lies in the traditions and histories of painterly modes of production? It seems that according to Graw, a central part of vitalistic painting is a mysterious painterly element, where the author of the work is absent, or where we are not able to ascertain the work undergone to make such a painting. As we shall see in the next chapter, a closer look at the phenomena of colour will open up these two-way exchanges of perception and creation, providing an added dimension to the way in which we can understand agency in artworks.

Chapter 3: Agency and the formal properties of artworks

3.1 Considering painterly and sculptural qualities as agential forces

Let us pause and think about yellow for a moment. French painter Pierre Bonnard is said to have noted 'a painting can never have too much yellow'[131]. Imagine a dark cadmium yellow, rich, with a sunflowery, orangey hue. This sits next to a cooler, paler, lemon yellow, still buttery enough but perhaps neutralised with a coolish titanium white. These two colours are joined with a deep yellow ochre, golden, darkest in tone of them all. Now add another colour to sit alongside the others, a pale lilac. Do you see this as a silvery grey, or a deep lavender, or does it actively oscillate between the two? How we see these colours is also affected by their very material: whether it is oil paint we see, acrylic, watercolour, distemper, whether the pigments are cheap, medium-range or expensive, whether they are layered on top of one another in translucent thin marks, thickened with encaustic wax, or slopped on with a palette knife in crusted smears. Scottish painter Andrew Cranston's *Conditioning: Likes and Dislikes* (2023) (fig. 25) shows the range of yellows available to us, seemingly asking when does a yellow stop being yellow? How does a discussion of this help us as painters to think through colour and material, and colour as a material?

Fig 25. Andrew Cranston, *Conditioning: Likes and Dislikes,* 2023, oil and varnish on hardback book cover, 11 x 9 inches. Photo: Ingleby.

In the previous two chapters, we explored how the notion of agency can be viewed in relation to objects first, and then paintings, including issues arising with

[131] Andrew Wilson, *The Simon Sainsbury Bequest to Tate and the National Gallery* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008) p.75.

applying new materialist thinking to artworks. This chapter argues that formal properties of paintings and sculptures, such as colour, shape, texture, line, composition, scale and proportions provide additional dimensions to the notion of agency within art. As we have seen in chapter one, it is not a question of a thing either 'having' or 'not having' agency, it is a question of the degree to which a painting or sculpture becomes intertwined and enmeshed with the very fabric of things around it. Under the new materialist extension of what constitutes an agential force, there are both human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic dimensions at play in these exchanges. An expanded notion of what agency constitutes is vital for us, not only politically, and environmentally, but also artistically; asking questions about the notion of agency in relation to artworks helps to reveal their affective power more clearly. A contentious concept in relation to art, affect is defined by Susanne von Falkenhausen, art historian and Professor Emerita of modern and contemporary art history at Humboldt University as: 'something that transgresses the limits of the human subject: an energetic exchange between materials, humans and animals that is independent of cultural and social conditioning'[132]. The study of affect is indicative of the subconscious, the unspoken, that which is beyond conscious thought: freedom through desire, expression, gesture, imagination and experience. So what can the study of such formal properties as mentioned above tell us about affect, and what roles do they play in generating painterly and sculptural self-reflexivity?

This chapter begins with the help of Amy Sillman's writings, which provide a short meditation on colour. We then turn to compare the works of Jules Olitski and Katharina Grosse, two painters whose works illuminate how the act of spray painting brings out awareness to the liveliness that is already apparent in the phenomenon of colour. Despite their historical, contextual and intentional differences, these artists help us explore how colour can be considered as an agential force within painting, through their preoccupation with colour. As we shall see, the formalist critique that Fried uses in discussing Olitski's paintings correlates with how contemporary painters are working with colour as an inherent medium and material. We then turn to look at Rachel Harrison's sculptures with an aim to draw out the connecting forces between formalism and new materialism, inspired by their wilful incoherence[133] and ability to shape-shift across multiple different readings. A look at American painter Clintel Steed's way of composing structures and handling of paint, alongside his application of line, mark and shape, helps to broaden out how paintings can begin to take on agential potential. The chapter ends with reflections on how closer considerations of colour, shape, composition and mark can enhance our understanding of autonomy in relation to art objects, by acting as a negotiators or go-betweens between subject and object.

[132] Susanne Von Falkenhausen, 'The trouble with 'affect theory' in in our age of outrage', *Frieze* 204 (2019) https://www.frieze.com/article/trouble-affect-theory-our-age-outrage [accessed 09/07/23]
[133] Paul Chan, In-Gallery Talks 'On Rachel Harrison, or what is non-salvific art,' Whitney Museum of American Art YouTube Channel, (2020) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9a5EFpicCUM [accessed 10/08/23]

3.2 Colour as a material

In her short and powerful 2016 essay *On Color,* painter Amy Sillman describes colour as a way of posing 'physical propositions […] sensuous experiences synesthetically merged under the sign of the hand.'[134] Colour is a tool of negotiation as well as painterly addition and negation. It is simultaneously aligned with art-historical theory, education, and philosophy as well as abundance, freedom, and anarchy. Colour is both arbitrary and deliberate, felt and thought, planned and spontaneous, significant, and meaningless, psychological and corporeal, emotional and astute, relational and solitary, anthropomorphic and other-worldly. It is 'an engine of ongoing change and metamorphosis'[135], bound up in 'the schizophrenic nature of its own rhetoric' [136]. What if we were to consider colour as an agential force? Examining what colour is doing in paintings by painters in late modernism and contemporary painting, can help us locate its autonomy and further our understanding of it as a material phenomenon.

On a cognitive level, we might consider colour as an agential force through its processual and relational aspects to human perception and material phenomena. Current research is revealing more questions than answers as to the nature of colour and how we perceive it. According to the group of international authors of a paper published in 2020, colour 'is a perceptual construct that arises from neural processing in hierarchically organized cortical visual areas'[137]. The paper identifies an unsolved question: 'whether the neural responses at each stage of cortical processing represent a physical stimulus or a color we see'[138]. Kim, Hong et. al. elucidate:

> 'Neural representations corresponding to the colors we experience, however, remain a fundamental unsolved problem because previous studies often did not dissociate the chromaticity of a stimulus entering the eye, which is in the domain of physics, from the color one sees, which is in the domain of perception. This misconstrues neural representations evoked by physical-stimulus differences as a representation corresponding to color percepts. Although a given stimulus chromaticity may be strongly associated with a

[134] Amy Sillman, 'On Colour', in Graw, I. & Lajer-Burcharth, E. *Painting beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition.* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016) p.105
[135] Ibid
[136] Sillman, 'On Colour, p.111
[137] Insub Kim, Sang Wook Hong, Steven K. Shevelle, and Won Mok Shima, 'Neural representations of perceptual color experience in the human ventral visual pathway', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS),* 117(23) (2020) pp. 13145–13150 (p. 13145)
[138] Ibid.

> specific hue, a neural response to a chromaticity may not be presumed to represent a color we experience.'[139]

These questions have implications for us painters by illustrating the additional chasms between our choices and intentions as painters and the process of perception as observers of colour. There is much more to our perception of colour that goes beyond the notion of seeing colours as differing wavelengths of light, which suggests that perception is a much more fluid process of overlapping connections between stimulus, perception, recognition, interpretation, and identification. The difference between a colour that is mixed on a palette, surrounded by other colours, and affected by the colour of the palette itself, takes on new qualities when it is applied to a surface, either opaquely, thinly, in washes, or caked on in drying, cracked paint, surrounded by a new range of colours. All of these subtle differences are at play in painting, meaning we are engaged in a process of constant action and reaction. The practice of painting, which in this project means working with colour, is an ongoing, shifting, revealing and concealing of perceptual positioning in relation to the colours we see and the colours we make.

At a sensory level, colour wields agency in terms of its profound ability to evoke physical, psychological and emotional responses in viewers. Different cultures ascribe distinct symbolic values to colours, with painters harnessing these associations to convey nuanced messages or provoke specific reactions. Colour shifts viewers into an infinite number of different sensory worlds, through association, memory, projection, and presence. Colour oscillates between the real and the imaginary and can be both at the same time. It can disembody an object thereby making it more individual or separate from the world. Colour can also self-impose diverse ranges of narratives within the one artwork, as seen in Ebony G Patterson's *In the Waiting… In the Weighing* (fig. 26). The work features glittered, shiny, pearlescent pinks, blues, purples and golds woven together in a mass of pearls, jacquards, sequins, brooches and tassels. The shiny, glittery quality of colours may have associations with 'low' art materials, crafts, cheap and mass-produced items, whilst also nodding towards opulence, glamour and camp. Deep mauves, violets and blacks offset pearlescent silvers, shiny golds and fuchsia pinks, the wide range of colours, materials and images present in the installation all reinforce the multi-layered meanings of the work. Lushly decorated surfaces draw us in to the piece, whilst images of people, body parts, places, animals and printed words are entangled with one another, which appear to signify the varied intersections between race, class, gender and violence.

[139] Ibid.

Fig. 26. Ebony G Patterson, *In the Waiting… In the Weighing,* 2021*,* Hand-cut jacquard woven photo tapestry with glitter, appliqués, pins, brooches, embellishments, fabric, tassels, acrylic beads, 7 hand-embellished resin-based vultures, on artist-designed vinyl wallpaper, 106 x 132 x 84 in. Photo: Monique Meloche Gallery.

We can explore colour's capacity to act as an organisational force in both sculpture and painting, in terms of its dynamic interaction with other formal elements within a painting, such as shape, composition, and texture. Willem de Kooning's *Door to the River* (fig. 27) from 1960, where yellows, peaches, grubby whites and an underlying trickle of blue all push, pull and exert themselves on one another, affected by the pace, direction, width and size of large house painter's brush strokes. The interaction between these colours can be seen as a form of agency, where colour influences the composition's overall impact and the viewer's interpretive process. Hidden layers of colour become partially revealed or concealed in the painting, highlighting the temporal dimension of colour and how it operates beyond the immediate visual encounter, offering a narrative that unfolds over time. Colour has diverse aspects to its structural forces: it can support an artwork by emphasising or reinforcing parts of it, or it can derail or ambush the aim or direction of an artwork. As we will see with the work of artists like Katharina Grosse and Jules Olitski, colour's ability to transcend a material's surface by its seeming projection into the pictorial space of a painting and its extension out into the three-dimensional world illustrates

its multifaceted nature, capable of transcending dimensions and engaging viewers on both conscious and subconscious levels.

Fig. 27. Willem de Kooning, *Door to the River*, 1960, oil on linen, 80 x 70 inches.

3.3 Jules Olitski, Katharina Grosse and spray painting: Colour in action

American artist Jules Olitksi (fig. 28) first began using spray guns as his painting tools in 1964, asserting that 'what I would like in my painting is simply a spray of color that hangs like a cloud, but does not lose its shape.'[140] Alongside fellow Colour Field artists of the time, Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler, Olitski's work in the 1960s and 1970s concerned itself with non-representational colour fields whose process of paint application and subsequent surface were central to the formation of the paintings. Standing at a distance and using an industrial paint gun to coat his canvases, the mechanical process of spraying colour allowed for a repeatedly equal application and rendering of colour across the surface, whilst the changes in hue and temperature began to alter the sense of space. Michael Fried notes in his essay *Jules Olitski,* written in 1966-1967:

> 'Above all, spraying makes possible the interpenetration of different colors, the intensity of each of which appears to fluctuate continuously, independently of the intensity of the others. The different colors, one might say, inhabit not merely the same space but the same points in space.'[141]

[140] Jules Olitski, 'How My Art Gets Made,' *Partisan Review* 68, no. 4 (2001), pp. 617 – 623 (p. 617)
[141] Fried, p. 134

Fig 28. Jules Olitksi, *Patutsky in Paradise*, 1966, acrylic on canvas, 115 x 161 inches. Photo: Bridgeman Images.

Differences in colour are identified solely through their hues, not through form, which emphasises both 'the continuity of color as such and the uniqueness or autonomy or isolation of individual colors.'[142] Colour is not used as a device to articulate specific areas or planes of Olitski's paintings. Rather, colour begins to 'speak for itself by dissolving all definiteness of shape and distance'[143]. In *Lysander I* (fig. 29) we do not see colour as a quality to describe form, but instead we experience the phenomena of colour revealing itself, insisting upon itself. Fried also notes the colour's *intension,* 'a function of the concentration or density of a given color at any point'[144], becomes visible as simultaneously something that is physical, materially bound, and yet which is read as being weightless, atmospheric, airy. He notes:

> 'It is as though Olitski has found himself working in another dimension from that of lateral extension. Or as though he has discovered in spraying another direction for color to take - not out but in. It is, finally, as though by atomizing color Olitski has atomized, even disintegrated, the picture surface as well.'[145]

This atomizing, or disintegration, of the picture surface that Fried speaks of suggests the molecular breakdown of colour itself, the subsequent designs or patterns that form when the smallest particles themselves are broken up. It is though normally invisible molecules in the air were momentarily frozen, a spotlight illuminating them.

[142] Fried, p. 135
[143] Clement Greenberg quoted by Fried, p.134
[144] Fried, p. 134
[145] Ibid.

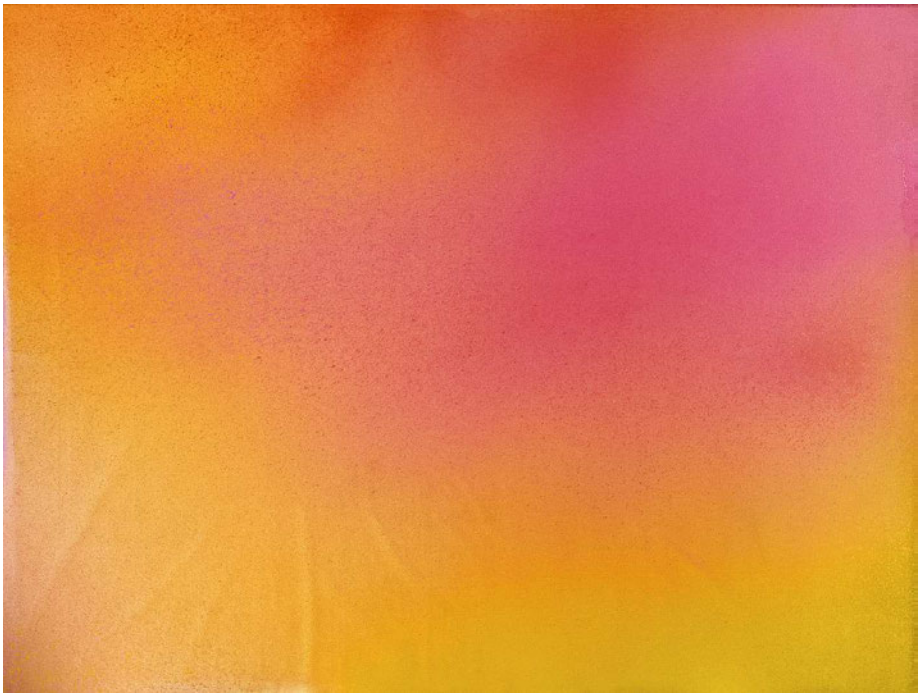

Fig 29. Jules Olitksi, *Lysander I*, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 97 x 125 inches. Photo: Estate of Jules Olitski/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The shift in making a canvas an arena for action, rather than a space used to create, delineate and construct representations, began with colour field painters in Olitski's era, another example being Helen Frankenthaler's stained paintings (fig. 30). Critic Harold Rosenberg noted in 1959 how:

> 'At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act – rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyse or 'express' an object, actual or imagined.'[146]

Whilst the term action still pertains to the movements, motions, and gestures of the painter, action painting opened a greater opportunity to become absorbed in the qualities of the painterly materials themselves. Greenberg noted how '[t]he effect [of staining] conveys a sense not only of color as somehow disembodied, and therefore more purely optical, but also of colour as thing that opens and expands the picture plane'[147].

[146] Harold Rosenberg, 'Getting Inside the Canvas' from 'The American Action Painters', in Charles Harrison & Paul Wood (Eds.) *Art in Theory 1900 – 2000: An* Anthology of Changing Ideas (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003) p.589

[147] Greenberg quoted by Fried, p.21

Fig. 30. Helen Frankenthaler, *Canal*, 1963, acrylic on canvas, 82 x 57 1/2 inches.

The action, or event, of the painter engaging with materials became the focus, which Rosenberg argued gradually dispensed with the formal concerns of form, colour, composition and drawing[148]. This also broke the already fragile distinction between life and art, as 'the painting itself is a 'moment' in the adulterated mixture of [the painter's] life'[149]. Fifty years after Olitski painted *Lysander I*, German artist Katharina Grosse extended modernist ideals of painting by physically extending the reach of spray painting on a colossal level. In figuratively pushing the boundaries of medium specificity, Grosse's vast, sprayed installations (fig. 31) recall the self-referentiality of painting and its performative process. Grosse understands painting as being neither 'an object separate from it its context,'[150] nor having 'any prescribed location'[151]. Instead, she says, 'I see very clearly that colour is actually taking away the boundary of the object. There is no subject-object relationship anymore. I think maybe that's what colour has the potential to make us think.'[152]

[148] Rosenberg, 'Getting Inside the Canvas', p.560
[149] Ibid.
[150] Barry Schwabsky, 'Post Essential Abstraction' in *Parkett,* 100/101 (2017), pp. 333 - 345 (p.333)
[151] Katharina Grosse, 'Katharina Grosse (An Interview with Paul Laster), *Conceptual Fine Arts* (2020) paragraph 3 http://tinyurl.com/59w2uptb [accessed 24/07/23]
[152] Katharina Grosse, 'There is no subject-object relationship anymore', *Art21,* (2019) paragraph 5 https://news.artnet.com/art-world/katharina-grosse-art21-1724064 [accessed 24/07/2023]

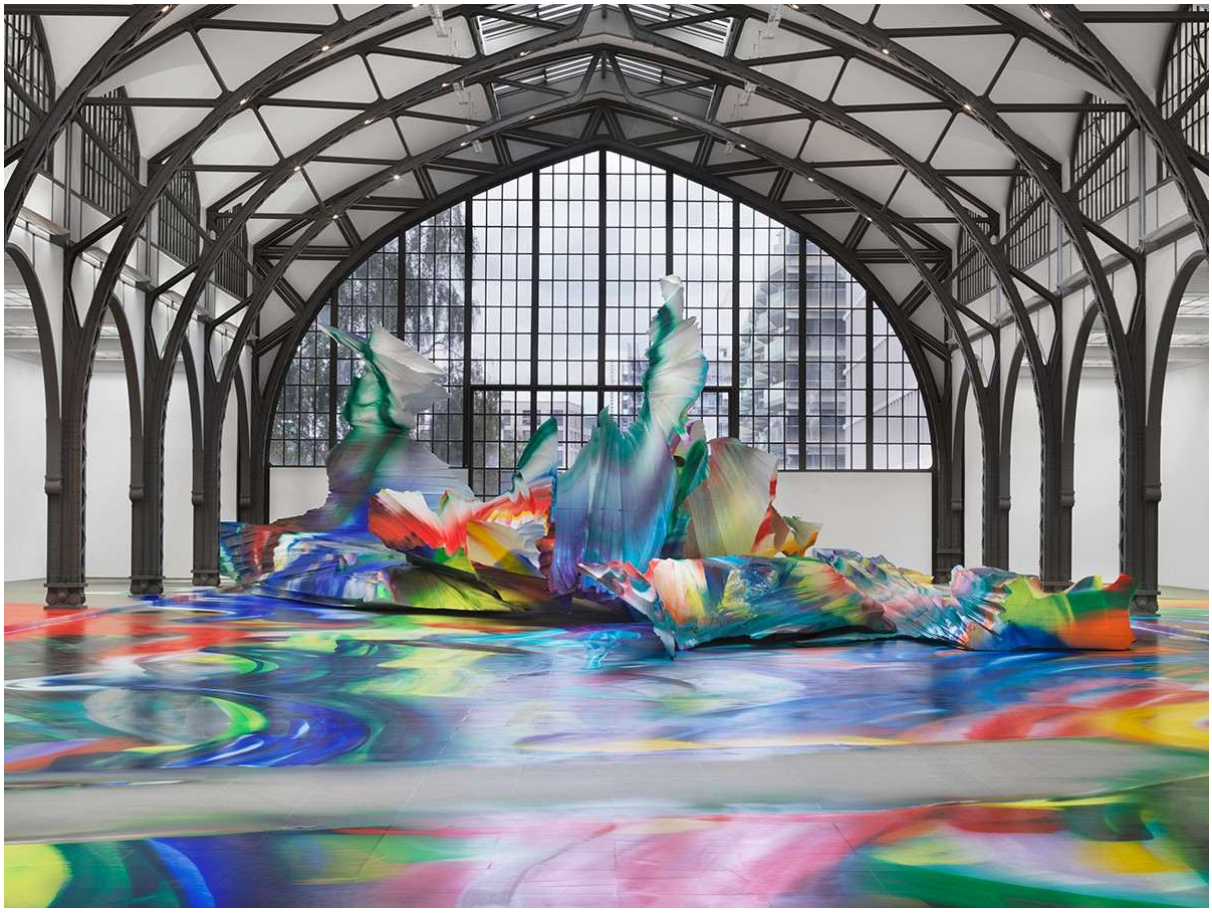

Fig. 31. Katharina Grosse, *It Wasn't Us,* 2020, Installation shot, Hamburger Bahnhof-Musuem. Photo: Jens Ziehe.

Louise Neri, senior director at Gagosian, describes Grosse's palette as 'toxic sublime'[153], ranging from saturated and bright emeralds, crimsons, oranges and yellows, with electric blues, teals and pinks running through and over each layer. The colour white often seems to act as an interruption in her paintings, a momentary neutralising effect which calls to mind a bare canvas. These differing ranges of hues indicate diverse modalities within the one installation, diverse gravitational forces, alternating speeds, and trajectories of gestures. In Grosse's gargantuan painted worlds, it is colour which has the power or capacity to break down and build new relationships between things. It is colour liberated from the confines of any support, free-flowing chroma that coats anything and everything that is in its way. It is colour itself which is constantly defining and redefining the parameters of things out in the world. In *It wasn't us*, we see how the colours of things sprayed in her path also attach themselves to the artwork's local environment. The opticality of colour seems to be at odds with the gravitational weight of the objects and the solidity of the environment, whilst also exaggerating and highlighting these very components. It seems that colour

[153] Louise Neri, 'Introduction,' in *Katharina Grosse* by Dan Cameron and Okwui Enwezor (New York: Gagosian, 2018), p.9

can simultaneously separate out and isolate objects, whilst also merge objects to the space they are in.

The inclusion of objects into Grosse's work marks a point of historical and contextual departure from Olitski's canvases, incorporating amongst many things household items, furniture, mounds of earth and clothing. These bring a narrative aspect to the works, incorporating the object into the artwork through the gesture of the spray paint, and so reorienting our readings of said objects. The act of democratically covering the surfaces of a window, a wall, a building as well as a bed, a lamp, and a pile of dirt, obliterates these things. Coating everything in her path in paint speaks of a desire to bring everything, no matter how big or small, organic or manmade, precious or disposable, down to the same, base, level. Through this process there lies a reconciliation of the unrelatability of things through colour. Barry Schwabsky notes:

> 'To borrow Grosse's own language, one could say that the elements fuse while, paradoxically, remaining elements. Made of a multiplicity of masked-out layers, they invite the viewer to look as though through one aperture after another into successive planes—and yet each plane, often somehow at once vaporous and implacable, appears to be no deeper, no more or less distant than the others.'[154]

And yet painting the wall and ceiling so they no longer seem to change planes effectively forces the environment Grosse is painting to 'succumb to the flat space of painting.'[155] Similar to Clement Greenberg's observation that an Olitski spray painting 'contrives an illusion of depth that somehow extrudes all suggestions of depth back to the picture's surface'[156], Grosse also manages to conjure a 3D world of light and colour that would seem impervious to flatness, but which also speaks of the flat space of the picture plane. Similar to Olitski's spray paintings, we see how colour is not secondary to the properties that make up our perception of an object, as it 'is neither the color of a substance nor the color of a surface but color as its own substance acting independently of the surfaces to which it is applied.'[157]

Colour in the work of both artists seem to extend out beyond the limits of the medium of paint itself. Colour is conveyed by perception and light into the vast space between the surface of the painting and our eyes. The act of spraying paint is a gestural action, the distance between the sprayer and the surface far greater, less personal, more anonymous than painting a surface up close with a paintbrush. Though

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[154] Schwabsky, 'Post Essential Abstraction', p.337
[155] Hamza Walker, 'Katharina Grosse Was Here,' *Renaissance Society Publishing* (2007) paragraph 4 https://renaissancesociety.org/publishing/36/katharina-grosse-was-here/ [accessed 08/07/2023]
[156] Greenberg, quoted by Fried, p.135
[157] Walker, paragraph 5

the paintings have unmistakeably been made by their creators, and despite having their general 'signature', we don't feel the hand of either artist on the works themselves. In turn, our role as viewer is repositioned as a roaming 'eye' as art critic Barry Schwabsky says:

> 'The viewer is the mobile but invisible blind spot within the field. "Nothing in the visual field allows you to infer that it is seen by an eye," as Wittgenstein pointed out nearly a century ago. Or maybe we should amend that: The movement of the visual field allows us to infer that there is something unseen that sees it; "eye" is merely a name for this factor X.'[158]

With no traditional or ideal standpoint from which to observe the work, we instead move in, out, and around this experiential perception of colour in space. Our body's relationship to the work becomes more central, as we become another 'ingredient' in what Graham Harman identifies as the trio of elements that make up a work of art: beholder, artwork and encounter[159]. Under Michael Fried's formalism, 'theatrical' works of art or artworks which played to the viewer's sensibilities were dismissed, in comparison to artworks which he deemed were 'absorbed' in themselves or did not acknowledge the presence of the beholder[160]. Grosse's work seems to mirror Harman's updated concept of the theatrical, which allows for a three-way relationship to arise, by way of inviting the beholder into the equation of art + person = encounter/ person + encounter = art. Grosse's installations integrate the moving body into the physical experience of the artwork. Rather than viewing this as a theatrical experience for the beholder, it is opening up an unknown encounter between the body's senses and receptors and three-dimensional colour fields. 'For the body's capacities remain diffuse and bound up with passions or sensations that are not readily decoded, much less controlled'[161], writes Diana Coole, as 'such corporeal reactions cannot simply be designated instinctual. They are lived ways of experience, and therefore include a contingent cultural element.'[162]

But whilst these aspects of Grosse's work are ideologically worthy, and in keeping with the current trend in the Humanities of wanting to blur the boundaries between subject and object, do the works themselves have agential power as such? Can Grosse's process really be as non-hierarchical in its approach, as she suggests? 'My input has the same importance as the input of the machine I employ, the paint, the time, the place, the studio assistants, and all the other factors that come into play.'[163] As admirable as a non-hierarchical approach to making may be, can a

[158] Schwabsky, 'Post Essential Abstraction', p.334
[159] Harman, *Art and Objects*, p.45
[160] Fried, p.163
[161] Coole, Rethinking agency, p.130
[162] Coole, Rethinking agency, p.131
[163] Katharina Grosse, *Is it You?* Exhibition Guide (Baltimore: Baltimore Museum of Fine Art, 2021) p.4 https://artbma.org/exhibition/katharina-grosse-is-it-you/guide [accessed 03/02/204]

painter really be 'just another factor' at play in the studio when creating such enormous visionary works? The ideologies and language of new materialist agendas align neatly with current trends in the arts, and so connect well with the current economical, ecological and philosophical concerns regarding climate change, environmental disasters, globalisation, capitalism, identity politics, social justice and international and national power dynamics. The ability to correlate artwork to current critiques around anthropocentrism might serve the artist well, by remaining 'on topic' in this sense. But what about vital aspects of the making process that lie outside of these ideological standpoints? What are we missing when the lofty aims of new materialist discourse set the agendas of making art? Looking at the works of sculptor Rachel Harrison can help us navigate the complex dynamics of ideology and material at play in contemporary art.

3.4 On Rachel Harrison's colour: In defence of unprincipled sculpture

Some words to describe sculptural works by American artist Rachel Harrison might be 'nonsensical', 'diabolical', 'outrageous'. Other words might include 'defies description', 'open-ended' as well as artist and writer Paul Chan's favourite, a 'disturbing sense of randomness'[164]. At her retrospective *Life Hack* at the Whitney Museum, New York, from October 2019 to January 2020, works on show featured highly saturated coloured objects uncomfortably squashed or juxtaposed alongside found things: a grubby red-haired doll perches over the top of a cream plaster tower with orange paint daubed on the sides, a red hoover upholds a maroon polystyrene tower upright, a platinum blonde wig sits atop a pale, sickly green mass, a violet USB stick juts out of an enormous purple papier-mâché balloon. Gallery walls were taken down and stacked on top of one another in a corner, with a framed print of Mailyn Monroe casually nailed to them. When grouped together, their lack of coherence and connection with one another visually and thematically seems to increase, as if we were flipping between tv channels in quick succession. Art theorist Yve-Alain Bois' description of Georges Bataille's *Documents* sits well alongside these sculptures as 'volatile taxonomies', 'categorical ruptures' and 'acts of sabotage against the academic world and the spirit of system'[165]. The works themselves seem to undermine established codes and ways of reading artworks.

The structural use of coloured materials in Harrison's sculptures (figs. 32, 33) provides us with a new way of seeing both colour and material autonomy. Colour often separates out from the object that it makes up, the oddness of the material then being drawn to our attention. The presence of colour appears integral to the individual structure, the moments of painted colour often taking precedence over their organic, bulky forms. Slippages occurs between the origin colour of a material and the subsequent colours it gets covered, soaked or spattered with. Colour is an anthropomorphic force, calling our attention to the scale and presence of bodies as Amy Sillman says: 'Her colours do things: they loom up, they come at you in big corporeal patches, as blobs and façades and silhouettes that confront you like an encounter with another person or their shadow.'[166] In colour's power to delineate edges, to indicate relations and gaps between shapes, the legibility of a particular colour is just as significant as a shape itself.

[164] Chan, 'On Rachel Harrison', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9a5EFpicCUM [accessed 10/08/23]
[165] Yve-Alain Bois, 'The Use Value of Formless' in Bois, Y-A. & Krauss, R. (Eds) *Formless: A user's guide.* (Zone Books: New York, 2007) p.16
[166] Sillman, p.186

Fig. 32. Rachel Harrison, *Hoarders,* 2012, Wood; polystyrene; chicken wire; cement; cardboard; acrylic; metal pail; flat screen monitor; wireless headphones; runway carpet; and Hoarders Video, digital video, color, sound. Photo: John Berens.

Sillman continues: 'Bodies, shapes, colors, and sizes therefore achieve equivalent objecthood in Harrison's work'[167], effectively diminishing any hierarchical ordering or privileging of one entity of the work over another. What if this assortment of 'things', as well as representing a stance on the dismantling of power hierarchies, was primarily read as pure, radical, colour, beyond any particular social, political or philosophical reading?

> 'Since Harrison deploys manufactured objects to mean (or represent) everything in the world that is really superficial (or perhaps, artificial), then color is free (as it is in painting) to be a formal player and to engage in the formal relations that are the very visual 'flesh' of the world.'[168]

[167] Sillman, p.187
[168] Ibid.

Fig 33. Rachel Harrison, *Life Hack*, 2019, Installation shot, Whitney Museum of American Art. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

In Chapter 1, we discovered how a new materialist reading of the term assemblage aligned with physical assemblages of artists such as Ashton Philips and Iza Genzken. In assorted 'things' being thrown and occasionally forced together, a kind of compositional anarchy ensues that nods towards the multidirectional, causal relations associated with agential force. Harrison's irreconcilable encounters seem in complete contrast to any totalising form of ideological or aesthetic authority, or what Chan describes as 'non-salvific'[169]. We are forced to let to go of the need for things to fit, and forced to re-evaluate what we know as sculpture when we come face to face with these foreign amalgamations. We wonder about the thought processes going on behind the scenes, wondering whether judgements of 'good' or 'bad' have been completely done away with, if this way of smashing stuff together is enough to call it 'art'. In possessing an 'other minded-ness' that:

> 'mak[es] room for other kinds of elements and features within a work and composing them such that their qualitative differences are heightened and showcased rather than

[169] Chan, On Rachel Harrison,' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9a5EFpicCUM [accessed 10/08/23]

> diminished, which makes work look cunning and dynamic, even thrilling.'[170]

Sculpture which draws out the qualitative differences of things around us, which refuses to unify into coherent, harmonious structures seem to mirror the way matter surrounds us in its many irresolute and resolute forms. A lack of homogeneity according to sculptural materials speaks to us of the variety of gestures, forces, impacts of things around us, from the smallest of plastic objects such as a USB stick, to a mountain bike attached to a metal pole with a photograph of Mel Gibson clinging to it. These are random, disorderly collections of things, continuously proliferating, shifting their frames of reference so that we never apprehend any complete system of logic as to their design or making. Through such structured chaos it is possible to see autonomous how 'thingly' agents operate, intervene, and disrupt our worlds, looking back at us from their side of things.

[170] Ibid,

3.5 Clintel Steed: How agency arises through line, mark and shape

An arc of thick, yellow blocks of paint forms a crane, reaching across and down the canvas, the force of it pushing down into a heap of grey and tangled oblongs. Behind it, the space opens out into a vast and cavernous space, the bottom of a blue crane and its steel girders beginning its ascent over to the right. Construction sites seem to be inherently tied to time. They represent a process of transformation, a past (what was there before), a present (the act of building), and a future (what the site will become). American painter Clintel Steed (b.1977) captures this temporality in his *Construction Site* (fig. 34) through his fragmented and hectic composition, which resists closure and completion. We are invited to engage with the site as a moment in flux, where agency is connected to the unfolding of time and space. The fragmented nature of the building site as a composition is where no single element dominates; instead, agency is dispersed across the network of activities and materials. Known for his dynamic and expressive paintings that often engage with historical, social, and personal themes, Steed's works combine bold, stylised and gestural brushmarks with a deep awareness of the legacies of art history. The resulting paintings are resonant with raw immediacy and intellectual complexity, which speak to potential painterly agency through the modes of line, shape, mark and composition.

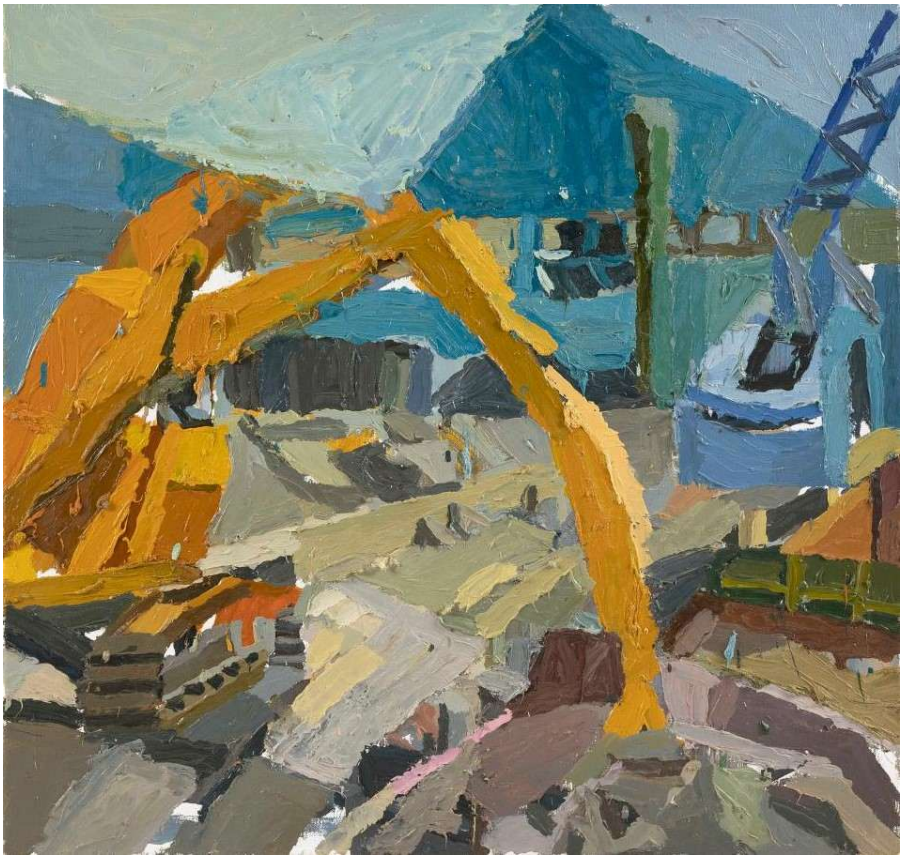


Fig. 34. Clintel Steed, *Construction Site,* c. 2005, oil on canvas, 26 x 26 inches. Photo: Mark Borghi Gallery.

The shapes in Steed's painting are irregular, angular, and interlocking. The nature of a construction site, provisional and in a state of becoming, coincides with these abstracted, rough shapes, sometimes incomplete and not fully resolved or not fully covering the surface of the canvas. The abstraction, flattening and emphasis of shape serve as dynamic and active participants in building the composition. The breaking up of forms into smaller, jagged shapes mirrors the deconstruction and reconstruction inherent in the site, aligning the formal language of the painting with its subject matter. Agency resides both in the act of transformation of the scene, as well as the suggestive shapes, at once abstracted but also rigorous, directional and emphatic. Meanwhile, lines in Steed's work, both implied and explicit, function as dynamic conduits of energy. They exist most often as edges of chunks of paint, fragmented, gestural and rough, rather than controlled and tight outlines. They seem bulging with energy and fullness and take on a three-dimensional aspect, actively shaping the scene rather than merely describing it. The diagonal and angular nature of these lines disrupts spatial stability, giving the impression that the construction site is alive with competing forces of gravity, human labour, and mechanical intervention.

A multiplicity of marks is at play in the painting, ranging from long sweeping gestures for the crane, smaller staccato strokes for rubble, and layered dabs for architectural forms. We see a network of interactions through these marks, suggesting the varied forces and actors at play on the site, from human hands to machinery. These marks in turn draw attention to the material qualities of the paint itself, its thickness, consistency, application, as well as relational groupings of harmonious tones and similar hues. We are presented with a blurring between the representation of flat painted shape, and the real materials on site, concrete, steel and dirt. Steed's gestural marks thus parallel the gestures of construction workers and machinery, the act of painting thereby mirroring the act of building. In this sense, agency is not only present in the construction site itself but also in the artist's hand as he engages with the canvas. The painting becomes a site where creative forces converge, both the literal forces of construction and the metaphoric forces of painterly creation. By elevating a construction site, an often-overlooked element of urban life, into a subject worthy of painting, Steed grants it a form of agency within the cultural sphere. He repositions the site as a space of creativity and potential, challenging the viewer to see it as more than just a mundane yet necessary part of living in the world. This reframing aligns with the idea that agency can arise from the act of paying attention and recontextualizing.

So too can we see line, mark and shape acting as agentic properties in another painting by Steed, *The Final Piece* (fig. 35) from 2021. Part of an exhibition in 2021 entitled *Behind the Hood*, the painting was made during the year after the murder of Black American George Floyd in May 2020, amidst riots, demonstrations and global movements calling for action to uphold the rights of people of colour against police brutality. The painting was also made at a time when four Philip Guston exhibitions

were postponed in the United States[171]. Clintel Steed was one of over 2000 artists who were critical of the move to postpone the shows, alongside other painters of colour including Glenn Ligon and Trenton Doyle Hancock[172].

Fig. 35. Clintel Steed, *The Final piece,* 2021, oil on canvas, 54 x 54 inches. Photo: Mark Borghi Gallery.

Contrasting against the individual's sense of power and agency in the world, the blindfold exists as a barrier to clear vision, either self-imposed through wilful

[171] 'In such an environment, it might be understandable why four museums retreated from plans to show a Philip Guston retrospective that included paintings the white artist completed in the late 1960s and early 1970s with Ku Klux Klan-inspired hooded figures as their subjects. The four venues, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Tate Modern in London, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, cited the pandemic as the initial rationale. Nonetheless, they eventually pushed the exhibition much further out, to 2024, stating that they wanted more time to bring in "additional perspectives and voices to shape how we present" the work.' Jennifer Landes, *Reclaiming Philip Guston,* East Hampton Star, paragraph 2, (2021) https://www.easthamptonstar.com/arts/2021218/reclaiming-philip-guston [accessed 27/11/2024]

[172] Ibid.

ignorance or enforced by those in power. The result is a disconnection from self and others, a denial of individual agency and at worst, an internalised racism, through opaque structures of institutionalised prejudice and marginalisation. Despite these enormous barriers and setbacks, the figure in the painting appears to be grasping at it, possibly even peeking through, a determination and resilience to continue despite the lack of control the situation affords. The painting reads as an act of direct confrontation, with history as well as the history of painting, and a reclaiming and reappropriation of the subject matter of a Ku Klux Klansman from mid-century, white artists.

Shapes are not passive elements in this painting; they actively construct a self-portrait that becomes the site of interrogation about authorship, identity and empowerment within personal and public spheres. There is a tautness and relationality to the way that shapes of colour encounter one another; the painting has undergone a process of deconstruction, simplification, and amplification of every shape that constitutes the painting. Large shapes have been roughly painted over, their underpainting often still visible through marks in the paint. Through their gestural, fragmented, and layered qualities, these marks enact the very agency they depict, emphasizing the dynamic interplay and shifting changes between individuals, representations, histories, legacies and symbols of oppression (scales of justice, a ball and chain and shackles hanging behind the painter). This approach to the construction and reconstruction of a painting transforms it into an active, living document of vision, reflection, creation, and change. Clintel Steed's works demonstrate how a painting can emerge as a site where multiple forces and ideas are at work through the way it has been painted. Paint and brushstrokes act with directive action and energy, painterly processes of addressing and readdressing shape illuminate how thinking manifests through the act of painting. Gestural, meandering, broken and harsh lines serve as compositional guides as well as disruptive forces. The qualities of the painting itself become active participants in shaping how we perceive and engage with Steed's subject matter.

3.6 Conclusions

Over the course of this chapter, we looked at how formal aspects of artworks, including colour, composition, line, shape, and mark interact to create artworks where agency emerges from their interplay. Considerations of the cognitive and sensory aspects of colour helped to underline how colour has agential potential as a force that is interactive with us in ways we don't fully understand yet. Current research which seeks to answer questions about the nature of colour and our neural responses to it, illustrates how such a phenomenon can interact with us in ways that go beyond our initial and quite limited understandings as humans. The action-reaction aspect of painting seems to elucidate how very indeterminacy of colour, and it is in these not-knowing moments of colour where its power and agency lies. An individual's response to an artwork, ranging from that of late-Modernist painting by Willem de Kooning or Jules Olitski, to contemporary installations by Ebony G Patterson or Katharina Grosse, can be grounded in the personal, cultural, historical responses to colour, and the individual and diverse narratives that colour conjures. Colour wields agency as an affective tool in this instance, through its power to move viewers.

Composition, or perhaps more appropriately anti-composition in the case of Rachel Harrison, can also serve to point and underline agentic properties of artworks. Through the non-salvific, anarchic bundling together of a seemingly random assortment of things, we see multidirectional, causal relations in action. We can understand how each element can be an active part that works either against, or towards a whole, and is open to multiple and unstable conceptual readings. Through examining line, mark and shape in Clintel Steed's paintings, we saw how the very way in which the painting was executed worked to underline, subvert and transform a painting's 'subject matter' into a site for action and reflection. Marks, shapes, and the visibility of painterly workings and reworkings, of deconstructing and redefining shapes across a flat surface, draw attention to the physical act of painting, a tool to reassess and redefine positions, boundaries, and hierarchies. Through his enlivened strokes, emphasised shapes, and uncompromising lines, Steed's subjective painting style co-mingles with the objects he's looking at, blurring the subject/ object dynamics. Steed's work ultimately underscores how agency is not confined to human actors but distributed across materials, processes, and the temporal flow of creation.

We see in both Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried's formal observations of paintings in *Art and Objecthood* how colour begins to 'speak for itself'[173] through being the subject matter of Olitski's spray paintings of the late 1960's and 1970's. Such a formalist discussion of colour builds on our understanding of agency in relation to art objects, through helping us understand how colour can be seen as an autonomous agent, an active component in the complex relationships between matter, perception and the body. When the optical qualities of colour become the central focus of a

[173] Greenberg, quoted by Fried, p.134

painting, we are aware how its own substance acts independently, as it no longer is used as a vehicle to describe other things. Working with colour through the act of painting therefore can teach us how the supposed binary between subject-object dissolves. We think that there is an external world 'out there', but in bringing colour, object and two-dimensional painting together, we realise that our perceptions of the world and the world itself become intertwined, in the same way that the phenomenon of colour itself is both in the external object, as well as in the way we process sense data.

Chapter Four: To the Studio[174]

4.1 The iterative process

This practice led inquiry encompassed creating an array of different working propositions in the studio, to interrogate the theoretical, philosophical and practical implications of how a formalist perspective maps on to new materialist thought. In amidst the collected junk, debris, fragmentary ideas, failed experiments, broken shards of previously worked upon things, a persistence arises in the perseverance of working with stuff. When navigating new stages of praxis, moments of learning can generate giant shifts of focus in the studio. Matter and materials, and their meanings and connections are changing, and so new methods of working slowly appear. Emerging responses to new materialist theories in visual culture surface and then submerge themselves in the works in the studio. Pieces revolve from table, to wall, to floor, to next the bin, are momentarily hidden from sight whilst new fragments take their place and suddenly resurface following discussion, readings or periods of writing.

The gathering of found objects and materials has been central to the ongoing process of collecting, observing, and working with matter. Part of my role as artist has been to investigate the relationship with discarded bits of matter and debris that inevitably gets circulated, bought, collected, discarded, and thrown away. Working with found objects add historical, ethical and political dimensions to the artworks by their role in circular economies. The promotion of eliminating waste and keeping products and materials in use are central methodological concerns for this project. Alongside the growing awareness of our damaging impacts through the increased use and immediate rejection of material products, the connection between our lives as makers and our material waste complexifies. Our materiality as visual artists now includes centuries of rubble, plastic and waste from massive public and private industrial production and consumption, and the subsequent ecological and socio-geo-political fallout. According to Statista, an online global data collection company, the UK alone generated 2.5 million metric tons of plastic packaging in 2021, with an estimated 100 billion pieces of plastic packaging being thrown away each year[175]. The amount of discarded material readily available to the maker is everywhere. Perhaps because of its ubiquity, using discarded materials has become a common currency, a banality even, that becomes a part of our everyday, sculptural language.

The works made over the duration of this project can be determined as 'ecological art' in the sense that 'art that includes its environment(s) in its very form'[176],

[174] The title refers to Jake Auerbach's 2001 film which gives a unique insight into his father, painter Frank Auerbach, and his painting practice through interviews and studio visits.
[175] Bruna Alves, 'Plastic wastes in the UK – statistics and figures' (2023) paragraph 1 https://www.statista.com/topics/4918/plastic-waste-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/#topicOverview [accessed 24/11/2023]
[176] Timothy Morton, *All Art is Ecological.* (Penguin: London, 2021) p.18

as philosopher Timothy Morton argues. With this understanding, all art then *is* ecological, in the same way that art *is* about race, class, gender, and politics, if not explicitly saying so. The objects we make, create and then cast into the world, and the statements we make about such things, are always talking about the world at large, but are also pointing to ideas beyond our frames of reference. Ecological art therefore has the capacity to short-circuit easy, bland or bleak certainties by revealing what Morton calls 'the spooky openness of things'[177]:

> 'Objects are unique. Objects can't be reduced to smaller objects or dissolved upward into larger ones. Objects are withdrawn from one another and from themselves. Objects are Tardis-like, larger on the inside than they are on the outside. Objects are uncanny. Objects compose an untotalizable nonwhole set that defies holism and reductionism. There is thus no top object that gives all objects value and meaning, and no bottom object to which they can be reduced.'[178]

In saying 'we are not human all the way through'[179], we are reminded that our very being is reliant on a multitude on nonhuman properties and catalysts. We are in a duet with the things that oscillate around us, and the more that we attune ourselves to this, the more conscious we become of this intertwined relationship. However, the formalism this project endorses wants to recognise the formal aspects of discarded materials, their shape, form, colour, texture, size, relationality, consistency, as being just as significant as any ecological message determined by the beholder.

In chapter one, we explored three aspects from Fried's Art and Objecthood, namely relationality, presence, and anthropomorphism. Chapter two looked at the notion of agency in relation to painting, whilst chapter three looked at how formal properties of paintings and sculptures can be considered an important aspect to the elaboration of agency within art objects. Looking at the central concerns of each chapter in relation to my practice, this chapter examines how the theory informed the practice, how the practice informed the theory, where there the two came together, and where the two diverged. The photographs in the following section indicate works which are in-process or in-progress by nature. They capture a particular moment or arrangement of a lengthier iterative process. Meanwhile the photographs in the portfolio which complement the written thesis are more resolved works, in that they are more 'finished' or resolved, as much as they can be considered so. These are signposted, and begin in section 4.3.

[177] Morton, *All Art is Ecological,* p.28
[178] Morton, *Hyperobjects*, p.14
[179] Morton, *All Art is Ecological,* p.23

4.2 Material Contingencies

During the first year of the project, there was a temporal aspect to the 'gatherings' of things made in the studio, with combinations of objects often feeling momentarily or temporarily placed alongside one another. These groupings of things were ad-hoc, contingent, unstable, often being put together by chance, or through unconscious reflex. Autonomous material relations were at work in a series of post and lintel maquettes from 2021. In *Tooling, Comforts* (fig. 36), a found piece of driftwood sits upright, with an appendage sticking out of its head, undermining the conventional notion of a straight lintel. A paler, timber strut of wood stands adjacent, in close proximity. At its core, it is also driftwood, but in refined, mechanised, industrialised state. A soft, sympathetic hand of clay is a carrying agent, taking us from one form to the other. There is a tension between the pulling together of the pieces by the clay and the way they are holding themselves apart. The sculptural content is about one hits the ground, and how one lifts from the ground. The timber strut presents a downward motion that forces its way into the ground, the driftwood lifts itself up with an upward motion. Despite being a unified work, the two posts exist in quite separate worlds, regardless of their common material origin. These configurations show what materials intrinsically are, what they can do, and what they can't do.

Fig. 36. Ginny Elston, *Tooling, Comforts* 2021, driftwood, clay, timber 18 x 6 x 4 inches.

Conglomerations of 'things' began to pile up in the studio during the end of the first year and second year of the project (figs. 37, 38). Some pieces were scattered about, some pulled together in a mass of stuff, demanding my attention with their looming presence. There was a continual and indeterminate shifting between an aesthetic drive towards 'making' a sculptural work, and allowing things to be the piles of things they are, irrational and self-involved. The size of these tiny things stood in great contrast to the magnitude of the burden of the trash I was collecting, as well any sense of monumental or heroic statuary. They seemed diametrically opposed to Morton's 'hyperobjects' [180], unfathomable, boundaryless and anxiety-inducing concepts that transcend a human's understanding of space and time. There was perhaps a subconscious need to exert control over, or to manage, to minimise, the size, impact and strain of all this boundless material waste that exists in the world.

Fig. 37. Ginny Elston, *Untitled,* 2021, clay, lamb's wool, thistle, pink acrylic paint, zip-tie, metal, 3 x 3 x 3 inches.

[180] Some examples of hyperobjects include black holes, oil spills, climate change, and capitalism.

Fig. 38. Ginny Elston, *Untitled,* 2021, clay, lamb's wool, thistles, metal, 4 x 3 x 2 inches.

The notion of presence deepened during a short residency in the summer of 2021, when I occupied a large theatre space on the outskirts of Edinburgh. Over four days, I introduced a variety of items and materials from the studio on to a large stage measuring 12m x 7m, surrounded by black-out curtains. A lot of physical labour was involved in building skeletal structures, building and moving objects around the stage, lighting objects in particular ways and climbing scaffolding to film objects being dropped from height. The space itself seemed to demand a need for performance-based actions, and provided an invitation for me to physically roam around in, with and through these materials. The space, environment and scale of objects greatly differed from the small, hand-held 'things' that had been emerging in the studio. This opened up a new dynamic of being both more present to the demands of the objects in space, as well as relating to their presence differently through my own body.

The tarpaulin in figs. 39 - 40 places demand on the space through its own existence, in terms of the expanse of space it takes up and the presence it occupies on the stage. It casts its own shadow, and appears to shape shift depending on how it is lit. However, in sculptural terms it is working on a more visual level, rather than physiological level with the spectator. We may be impressed by its scale and by its form on an optical level, but the material isn't being harnessed to move us beyond its physical limitations nor is it left completely to its own devices. Throughout these four days, I was continuously moving

between the role of maker and spectator, which often contributed to an awkward tension in the work I was doing in the space.

Fig. 39 - 40. Ginny Elston, *Untitled (Tarp Arrangements),* 2021, Plastic tarpaulin, dimensions variable.

When making the works made from salvaged wood and plaster in the theatre, (figs. 41, 42) tension arose in the works which were built up from the ground; unstable, unwieldy, fragile. The iterations explore some age-old problems of statuary: how to make things stand up, sit back down, how they should do what they're told. They were constrained and controlled by my hands, body, subjective ideas. As I continuously tried to assert my dominance over the materials as a maker, they often fell over or fell apart, drooped, sagged, blew away. Other times they remained in a state of alert stillness. At the end of the first day of the residency, I realised the way I was approaching the works still seemed to be questioning 'what' the things were, rather than 'how' things were acting. The decision making that happens with our eyes becomes overbearing, and is at the source of a constant struggle between opening up a space where materials can do their thing, and directing, imposing and orchestrating. The paradoxical nature of the project began to emerge more clearly, in terms of being a maker and yet wanting to step back from the 'maker' position. It was only after the residency had finished, that upon reflection I began to realise how I continuously fell into the trap of assigning meaning and value only to certain materials, at the expense of others. The residency allowed me to see how necessary it was to help me move away from the solely visual, to allow the senses to lead phenomenologically, not always optically.

Fig. 41. Ginny Elston *Untitled (Wood and Bags Arrangements),* 2021*,* salvaged wood, plaster, jute, coloured thread*,* dimensions variable.

Fig. 42. Ginny Elston *Untitled (Arrangement I),* 2021, salvaged wood, plaster, jute, coloured thread dimensions variable.

The more 'installed', manipulated and shaped, organised and arranged a series of objects are, the less the materials seem to be speaking on their own terms. This was in great contrast to the 'formless' piles of stuff outside the four walls of the shed, which seemed to organise themselves into specific shapes, densities and masses, inherent to the qualities of the objects themselves (figs. 43 and 44). The forms which they held seemed autonomous, doing their own thing. Their separateness, their capacity to self-realise in their own particular form seemed to exert itself more. Fried would have noted the condition of these large pipes as 'non-art', what he termed 'objecthood':

> 'It is as though objecthood alone can, in the present circumstances, secure something's identity, if not as non-art, at least as neither painting or sculpture; or as though a work of art – more accurately, a work of modernist painting or sculpture – were in some essential respect *not an object*.'[181]

It was through this noticing that I realised the hierarchies of materiality significance I was subconsciously imposing on the matter around me. Already-formed 'objects' or materials from the studio had a different status to the piles of 'stuff' that just happened to be lying around, likewise the theatre, stage, lighting, scaffolding, etc. were all props to service the idea of the 'work', rather than being lively, complex and

[181] Fried, p.152

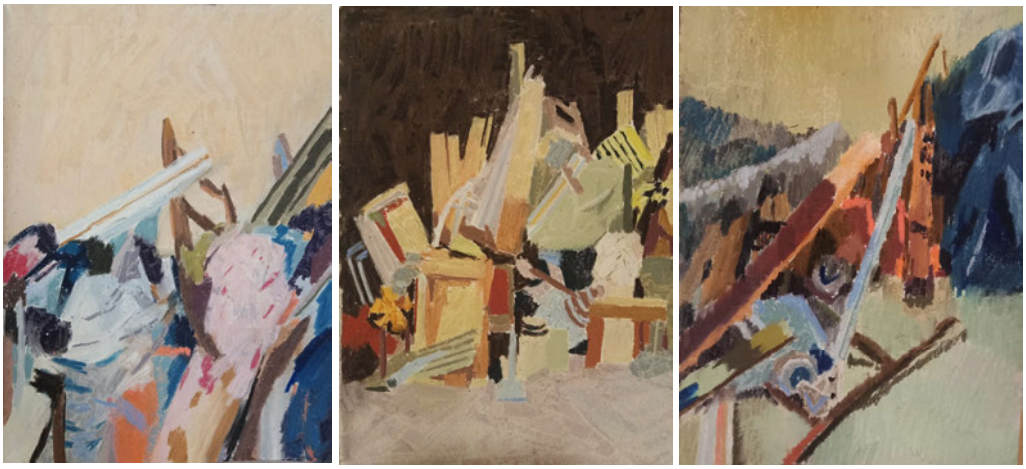
unique materials themselves. All of the 'works' or materials from the residency conjure a conscious dialogue between me as maker, and their innate qualities and behaviours as found materials. The configurations of objects that I was setting up on the stage merely represented just one, temporary arrangement of the materials I had been gathering. The anthropomorphising of materials and configurations of objects poses the new materialist maker with a conundrum: how much 'making' is too much making? How much is required on our behalf to allow the materials to speak, and if we don't intervene at all, what is left for us makers?

Figs. 43 (above) and 44 (below) Ginny Elston, Digital photographs taken at Drummhor Farm, Musselburgh.

4.3 Painterly self-reflexivity

During the spring and summer of 2022, I turned towards painting as a medium to talk about the nature of objects. I produced a series of paintings such as *Being is Beige* (portfolio p.6) works during a small residency at Edinburgh Palette in August 2022, which marked the beginning of physically painting directly on to the found 'things' themselves in the studio, and then translating back and forth between renderings of the paintings of the objects to the objects themselves. Throughout the residency, the act of painting revealed its potential as medium through which self-reflexivity and self-referentiality could speak about the autonomy of objects. Painting as a mode tells us how an artwork might embody thought as much as painterly thought might run through it. The pictorial quality of mark-making became present and visible on the objects themselves, transferences of one dimension to another. A colour note taken from a quick painting of the objects (fig. 45) would then be physically marked upon the surfaces of the pile of three-dimensional things. The next day I would then make a drawing of this newly painted iteration (figs. 46 - 48).

Fig. 45. Ginny Elston, *Proof III,* 2022, acrylic on paper, 11 x 16 inches.



Figs. 46, 47, 48. Ginny Elston, *Untitled Drawings,* 2023, chalk pastel on paper, 7 x 5 inches.

These paintings and collected objects of the past three years came together in a joint residency and exhibition with fellow artist and PhD researcher Susie Johnston at Patriothall Gallery, Edinburgh in March 2023. Several works from this exhibition, 'Objects of Conviction', revealed different potential agential relations between object and the world, as well as limitations that a vital materialist stance has for practising artists. In *Shut the Door* (fig. 49, portfolio p.13), layers of objects obfuscate a painting that lies underneath it. *The Burden of Being* (fig. 50, portfolio p.12) was laid on the floor of the gallery space, partially obstructed by other paintings placed on top of it and by the objects that were represented in the painting itself. As such, the painting became less of a visible, coherent image in a two-dimensional format, and more of three-dimensional 'thing', a thin, flat object piled underneath other things. Moments of visual connections arose between the colours, patterns and surfaces in the painting and objects, and the difference between a two-dimensional thing and a three-dimensional thing began to disappear. Following the end of the residency, the painting won the Student Award in the 2023 Jackson's Painting Prize competition. As one of 16 award-winning entries out of 11,255, it was subsequently invited to be exhibited in two London exhibitions over the summer. The indexical nature of the painting continued to shift long after it left the studio, where it was initially intended to be read as a two-dimensional painting as it was constructed on the studio floor. It then was transported to the gallery space where it was incorporated into an installation during a residency and exhibition, was trampled underfoot and receiving wear and tear from visitors. It was then returned back to being a two-dimensional work which suddenly operated in an entirely different value system, where it was carefully packaged and wrapped up and sent down to London.

Fig. 49. Ginny Elston, *Shut the Door,* 2023, timber, cotton, duck feathers, plastic, metal, card, tape, dimensions variable.

Fig. 50. Ginny Elston, *The Burden of Being,* 2022, acrylic on card, 47 x 66 inches.

Several installations made during the residency were formed of paintings that arose in direct relation to the objects and the space, and provided several new angles for considering painting's capacity for self-reflexivity. The different assortment of things suggested themselves through patches of amorphous colour, the lines in the painting occasionally referencing objects through their own 'object-like' quality. Paintings and things hung off the wall, some resting, suspended in mid-air, holding tentatively on to the wall with a piece of masking tape. The arrangements of the objects on the floor, the paintings curling up on themselves and bolstering themselves against the pillar were indicative of movement, of crawling on the floor, finding a structure to hold and move itself upwards. Paintings freed themselves from the wall, not only curving and bending themselves away from it, and dropping to the floor, but moving off the wall altogether. The paintings seemed to suggest an independence, a capacity of movement through self-acting forces. In *3D evidence in blue (after Guston)* (portfolio p.9), the whole construction seems to be in flux itself, the correlations of colours and textures across material surfaces being central to historical norms of painting and yet being in the process of separating out into differing constituent parts. The work nods to certain codes of abstraction, with grids, swaths of colour, whilst also acknowledging the natural and haphazard nature of material substance under the forces of weight and gravity. Objects became structural forms in relation to the paintings which referenced them, either propping a painting up on the wall or preventing the painting from rolling up (figs. 51, 52).

Figs. 51 - 52. Ginny Elston, residency iterations at Patriothall Gallery, Edinburgh, 2023.

4.4 Where paint meets object

Objects of Conviction at Patriothall Gallery in March 2023 prompted further questions about the role of colour in relation to agency, painting and the object. Chapter three argues that a formalist approach to thinking about colour itself not as a property of things but as a phenomenon in its own right, opens us up to its agential capacity to move viewers, to change spaces, and to blur boundaries between subject and object, as seen in the work of Katharina Grosse and Jessica Stockholder. During another short residency period at Edinburgh Palette in November and December 2023, I used spray paints to coat the surfaces of the same groupings of objects that I had been working on since September 2020. The process of spray-painting materials piled on top of one another left gaps, tracings, shadows, and outlines of the various objects onto one another. A net draped over a pile in the middle of the room left a distinct weave across the rest of the objects. Different floor-based and wall-based configurations explored formal considerations of the stripe, of the triad of colours red, white and blue, and the relationship between object to floor, and object to wall (fig. 53).

Fig. 53. Ginny Elston, residency iterations at Edinburgh Palette, 2023.

I was simultaneously compelled by the way Grosse's use of colour undermined object – subject relations through blurring boundaries, but also wary of the idea of ontologically flattening the artist amidst all the other factors at play in making work. Returning to the simple configurations of the 'things' made in 2020 and 2021, it became necessary to make the pile of objects floor-oriented, using the wall as a support. When working in tandem with paintings on the wall and objects, the painterly urge to form colour relationships between two-dimensional and three-dimensional objects dominated the decision-making process (fig. 54).

Fig. 54. Ginny Elston, residency iterations at Edinburgh Palette, 2023.

A short residency held in the Glasgow School of Art Garage Space in February 2024 helped to draw various aspects of the previous four years work together. Groupings of semi-painted objects, which operated on different levels, emerged because of the residency. Some of the arrangements were composed using parts of the walls or structures of the garage itself, and which were a continuity of a sculptural idea across a diverse range of media (figs. 55 and 56, portfolio p.17). These centred on a desire for and sense of intentionality and structure in their cohesiveness, which referenced formalist sculptural structures through their 'readymade-ness', their

rawness, roughness, and jumbled-togetherness such as Josep Llorens-Artigas and Joan Miró's collaborative objects (figs. 57 and 58). Others were more like grouping of objects that happened to have been left on the ground in a haphazard manner. In *FGOD (Flash Gordon Off-Duty)* (fig. 59, portfolio p.14) the same marks, lines and colours twist across different materials, both linking the objects together as sculptural matter, but also maintaining their own inherent qualities as card, wood and pillow. The groupings brought together divergent interests that cropped up throughout the duration of the project, from the early object-oriented 'things' that had mass, three dimensionality and volume, and were generally organic assemblages of differing sorts, to the painterly concerns and abstract painterly languages that emerged in the Patriothall residency of March 2023. The rolled card or the flat surface that denoted the typical message of 'painting' in terms of it being a watery substance applied to a flat ground seemed central to the works, and were included in the most successful groupings of objects.

Fig. 55 - 56. Ginny Elston, *A Hankering for the Field* (L) 2024, wood, plaster, card, thread, metal, paint, 60 x 8 x 4 inches and *Country Slide* (R) 2024, wood, plaster, card, paint, 40 x 125 x 23 inches.

Fig. 57 - 58. Josep Llorens-Artigas and Joan Miró, *Grand Personnage* (L) and *Objet* (R), both 1956, Earthenware, paint, found objects, dimensions unknown (L) and 31 x 16 x 18 inches (R). Photo: Jules Maeght Collection, San Francisco.

Titling the works for the viva exhibition, held in the same space at Glasgow School of Art in September 2024, posed a dilemma. The naming of an artwork can reveal the hegemonic power of language, its dominance in prescribing literal meanings to things and its overtly human-oriented structures. How could the title of a work emphasise the qualities of matter and material instead, making the titles invitations for engagement, rather than directive statements about the work? It was necessary that the titles I chose came from an internal, felt sense of words, their sounds and their multiple interpretations coming together with the ideas, sensations or experiences they connote. The titles needed to maintain an imaginative openness and suggestivity, allowing the beholder to construct their own meaning from the work, whilst also providing a subtle cue as to the concepts I was thinking about for each work. *Day Jewels* (fig. 60, portfolio p. 16) suggests luminosity, value, a celebration of the mundane transformed into something precious. 'Day' nods to the everyday, or the natural cycle of time, while 'jewels' elevates the work's modest materials to something treasured or rare, an alchemical transformation of discarded or utilitarian materials into objects of artistic and symbolic worth. Themes of rest, temporality, and regeneration are at play in the work, particularly through the pillow and the organic form of driftwood, grounding the work in both human and natural realms. *FGOD (Flash Gordon Off Duty)* contains a sense of the absurd, the colours and quality of objects somehow connoting the mundane moments of the American hero's life, the strange space-age belongings dropped on the floor after a hard day's adventuring. *NMSG (Night Manager Seeking Guru)* (fig. 61, portfolio p.15) is at once an enigmatic mix of the corporate, the spiritual, the silly and the surreal. The work pokes around at the

shadows and shapes lurking underneath the plastic sheeting and office chair, the 'night manager', conjuring images of responsibility, control, and oversight in quiet, liminal hours; 'seeking guru' implies a longing for guidance, transcendence, or enlightenment. In putting together these assemblages, I am searching for the moments where the mundane meets the transcendental, where the structured coincides with the aspirational, the banal and the profound collide in the same world. Others such as *Country Slide* have slightly more prosaic titles loosely referencing the overall shape and form of the work. *Someone's Excuse For Something* (portfolio p. 18) is a line taken from the book by Robert Winston, *A Flag for Sunrise,* when the protagonist is interrogated for some time by a group of academics about their work:

> 'You were saying, Doctor?'
> Holliwell looked at her blankly for a moment.
> 'The answer to all your questions is probably a yes.
> Everything that's known is someone's excuse for something.'[182]

Fig. 59. Ginny Elston, *FGOD (Flash Gordon Off Duty),* 2024, spray paint, card, pillow, wood, insulation, dimensions variable.

[182] Robert Stone, *A Flag for Sunrise* (London: Pan Books, 1982) p. 101

Fig. 60. Ginny Elston, *Day Jewels,* 2024, velvet, polythene, timber, driftwood, pillow, rubber

Together, the titles hint at a loose narrative structure determined through their curation in the space. We move from the precious and introspective (*Day Jewels*), to the strangely mundane and yet aspirational (*Night Manager Seeking Guru*), to the playful and deconstructive (*Flash Gordon Off Duty*), to the more formal, shape-based explorations *(Country Slide* and *A Hankering for the Field)*. The interweaving of word, idea, material, and assemblage give viewers a route around the physical arrangement of the works in the space, starting with *Day Jewels* at the entrance to the exhibition setting off a reflective tone to the works, the positioning of the objects being grounded and introspective, resembling a rest site or an altar for discarded materials. Placing this work low to the ground invites viewers to look closely, potentially kneeling or bending to engage with the objects. Similarly, *Flash Gordon Off Duty's* low-lying, casual arrangement aligns with an 'off duty' tone, with viewers coming across this discreet pile of 'stuff' unexpectedly. Only after some consideration might they begin to make formal connections between materials, patterns, colours and shapes. *Night Manager Seeking Guru* stands vertically, contrasting with the horizontal works. Its height and scale recall more traditional statuary, with a wider base and a tapered top, whilst continuing with the more haphazard arrangement of objects and paintings. Moving from floor-based objects to the height of this piece provides moments of variation and breathing space, within a wider context of compression and release of gatherings of materials. The last two installations end the exhibition with more of an emphasis on formal shapes pulled together through a paring down of simple, rectangular objects,

such as timber blocks, found driftwood, and flat sheets of card. Fragments of material, assemblages of sculptural forms, and the tension between balance, collapse, and composure establish a consistency in theme and vocabulary. Individual works, while disparate, form a visual system that evoke a sense of precariousness, improvisation, and material agency when considered together. Whilst this enables a formal coherence among the works, each set of material gatherings is unique and the set of juxtapositions in each work is unique. Throughout their installation and curation, it was necessary to draw out their material contrasts: pliability versus stability, surface versus form, structure versus anti-form, verticality versus horizontality.

What the different groupings have in common is their ability to sit in between being read as formalist sculpture and non-art. My interventions as a painter brings readymades back into dialogue with subjectivity, a notion that I ultimately can't and don't want to do away with as a painter. This necessarily posits the work in a certain field, arguably an elitist one based on specific art historical knowledge and is thus aimed at an audience with an understanding of formalist concerns of painting and sculpture. This drive to make correlations and correspondences between colours and objects sits at the very heart of the works which on an individual level is where I find voice, reason, meaning and authenticity in a tumultuous world that seems to increasingly value and require art to have political dimensions and moral aspirations.

Fig. 61. Ginny Elston, *NMSG (Night Manager Seeking Guru),* 2024, polythene sheeting, duct tape, spray paint, card, wood, rubber tubing, office chair, dimensions variable.

4.5 Conclusions

The artworks that we have just explored are the result of intuitive, process-led, material engagement. My concerns as an artist throughout the project have first and foremost been formal ones, meaning that aesthetic relations and properties are what I am working with and thinking about. As studio companions, texts on formalist discourse have been invaluable to my practice as an artist. Fried's discourse on the self-referentiality of artworks by Frank Stella, Anthony Caro and Jules Olitski resonate with my own processes and methods of working. Greenberg's call to consider medium specificity as a basis for making, whilst now seeming antiquated, still holds value to those interested in prioritising the nature and qualities of the medium inherent to the artwork, over any proposed message of the work. It is this reason ultimately why these aspects of modernist critique are worthy of re-reading and re-assessing today, as they

continue to hold relevance and weight in the field of contemporary art. However, the process of working in the studio alongside a textual reading of *Art and Objecthood* and intentionally trying to explore and highlight connections between a formalist reading of an object and new materialist interests proved challenging. At times, the works made during this project stood as companions to the thesis and offered themselves up as reinforcements to the ideas in the text. At other times, the works stood in direct contradiction. The objects themselves often ran up against the problem of either being subsumed by interpretation and/ or mere illustration of concept. The works made indoors during the Musselburgh residency stood at odds with the materials found in the surrounding environs. This was a key moment in the project, when my role as maker was called into question through critical examination of the work I was making versus the things I was encountering. It revealed the inherent contradictions in the project: the tussle between intuition and creative freedom, the need to answer research questions and where the philosophical, artistic and theoretical boundaries of the project overlapped.

Like other sculptors and painters, such as Phyllida Barlow, Jessica Stockholder and Rachel Harrison, the action and process of the making is both the cause and the effect of the work. It is important that the works speak primarily of modes of making, the way they've been created, over and above any relation abstract ideas or concepts. The concept behind the work is the display of the physical properties of the work itself. A recurring theme of my studio work is to make visible the creative process. In this sense, a lot of the works point to a self-referential aspect of making; the acts of observation, perception and intuition in response to external stimuli. The paintings from *Objects of Conviction* seem to be about the nature of stuff, the materials, and qualities of discarded objects themselves, as well as their formal qualities, their shapes, textures, and colours. I value the formal aspects of the objects over any form of cultural or ecological commentary that they provide. As such they are vehicles for painterly exploration, and yet the subject matter is not arbitrary. It is significant that the project focuses on discarded matter, as this not only provides considerations of three-dimensional and two-dimensional forms, shapes and colours which drive me as a maker, but also coincide with an interest in new materialist philosophies. The enquiry into the 'life' of matter and any potential agential relationships to its surroundings were central to the project and enabled a flow between the different aspects of practical work, theory, research and writing.

Chapter Five: Conclusions

5.1 Concluding remarks

This thesis is the result of a four-year project, endeavouring to explore the connections between a formalist critique of an art object and the ways in which it corresponds to a new materialist notion of agency and autonomy. The aim of this project was to bring to light certain formalist approaches to reading artworks that may have been overlooked or rejected and examine to what extent they can contribute to our understanding of agency in relation to art objects. Michael Fried's *Art and Objecthood* provides a framework for us to explore aspects of formalist criticism in relation to new materialist notions of agency and autonomy. Focused and intensive analysis of the formal considerations of artworks provided a strategy to directly connect with the art object itself. As we saw with Graham Harman's notion of duomining, a formalist critique offered us the opportunity to see the work for itself, rather than explaining the work down to its constituent parts or paraphrasing the work in terms of what it does. The first chapter looked at three key aspects of the essay, relationality, presence, and anthropomorphism. These elements were then visually connected to artworks of various artists work dating from the 1960's including Anthony Caro and Cy Twombly, and to current artists including Iza Genzken and Ashton Philips. The formalist mode of critique offered by Michael Fried gives the new materialist a grounding on which to form an 'aesthetic dimension' to things, which Professor Andrew Poe identified as missing in the research field. Gathered from a formalist mode of critique from the 1960's, the new materialist has a framework for prioritising autonomous material relations within artworks, by paying attention to formal considerations of construction and relationality between compositional elements, tuning in to the presence of objects and creating relations through anthropomorphising non-human and human aspects of the artwork.

When we encounter objects on a vast scale, such as Phyllida Barlow's *Quarry*, or on a smaller and more humble scale such as Cy Twombly's conglomerations of 'things', stacked together in a studio, the materiality of stuff awakens our curiosity as human beings. When such an encounter is combined with a formalist reading of its particular qualities, our understanding of these objects increases through our appreciation of their qualities on their own terms. The more time we give artworks through reflection of their internal and external relations, the presence they hold in the space, and their distinction or connection to us as humans, the more our world expands to accommodate new orders of things. When material and semiotic enmesh themselves so that boundaries between subject and environment begin to dissolve, we begin to see the agency that non-human matter possesses. Through Jane Bennett and Alfred Gell's reading of agency, we are provided with a striking reorientation to understanding ourselves as lively and interlinked materialities in a chain of actant stuff.

Turning our attention to painting with the help of Isabelle Graw and Hanneke Grootenboer, we tried to ascertain how exactly a painting might ultimately have the intellectual powers of a subject, and if so, what implications this might have for a maker. Grootenboer's notion of the pensive image enables us to rethink the one-way flow that we often assume is at work when we behold an artwork, namely that we as individuals imbue an artwork with its sole meaning. Seeing a painting as a catalyst for meandering thought does not necessarily mean that paintings, like humans, 'think for themselves', but instead they take a much more primary role in determining their own meaning which may remain aloof or indeterminate to us. Viewing creativity in painting as something which determines its own impulses of expansion, renewal and rebirth[183] enlivens the painting process to something that is more like Ingold's notion of correspondence. Painting as such therefore can be agential in that that it can 'become a 'living thing' without recourse to the imitation of any living thing.'[184] David Joselit's notion of transitivity and Graw's concept of the indexicality of paintings reveal how a painting can be said to be 'self-actualizing', meaning a painting can act agentially through altering its meanings, value and reception dependent on its environment and situation. Whilst this does not mean it is a primary agent, according to Alfred Gell's categorization, a painting such as Jutta Koether's *Hot Rod* can be argued to be an agent in terms of it being both a locus and a conduit for the agency of others. The two terms of self-reflexivity and self-referential, whilst open to debate in relation to painting, are central to our understanding of this complex relationship between a painting and its relational and processual dynamics with its maker, audience, and environment. We also began to see here how the idea of vital materialism can be conceptually enriching, and yet also problematic. Attributing agency to non-human entities can and does lead to confusion between intentionality and material behaviour, thereby complicating the artist's role as creator. We also must recognise that for some audiences, they may not necessarily read the agency of materials as being central to the artist's intention, instead focusing on the material's artistic qualities or representational strengths. For some artists, particularly those interested in formal approaches where the emphasis of creating is placed on form, composition, and the perceptual experiences of art, the actual process of making art still requires human decision-making and intervention. So arises a tension between the theoretical concept of distributed agency and the practical reality of human-oriented creation, where the practical and artistic drivers behind making work do not necessarily correlate to the ethical motivations behind vital materialism.

From painting we then moved to exploring colour itself, and its relationship to the idea of agency. We saw how considerations of the neural and cognitive processes of responding to the phenomena of colour is surrounded by ambiguity and uncertainty. We understand that somewhere along the line, our visual processing, sensory data, and light, form and electromagnetic wavelengths coincide to produce colour, but where exactly this all happens is still under some debate. Starting from a place of indeterminacy strengthens the agential capacity that colour possesses, as its affective quality remains enigmatic. We also saw how painters working in the 1960's

[183] Ingold, *Imagining for Real*, p.5
[184] Gell, p.76

championed by Michael Fried and Barbara Rose such as Jules Olitski, Kenneth Noland and Helen Frankenthaler were working to break free colour from a supportive role to describe or reinforce form. The active role these makers had in helping us see colour for itself, often by disembodying or dematerialising colour from its support and so making us aware of its mysteriousness and inscrutability. Contemporary artists such as Jessica Stockholder, Katharina Grosse and Rachel Harrison used colour in different ways and to different purposes, albeit with some similar methods such as spray painting. In calling our attention to the different modes and methods of working with colour, artist and writer Amy Sillman revealed its anthropomorphic force, its ability to shape-shift, to speak of multiple, different things at once to different people, to be 'an engine of ongoing change and metamorphosis'[185]. Other formal qualities of sculpture and painting, such as shape, line, quality of mark, composition and shape can also assert themselves as agential properties of artworks, in the way that they are lively and determinant aspects of the process of creation itself. Formal qualities of sculptures and artworks are active, dynamic participants in the way we recognise, understand and interpret meanings, and shift and change from maker to maker.

Finally, we have seen how the practical and theoretical aspects of the project came together, and where they diverged in the final chapter of thesis. One of the central questions of the project was a consideration of how makers were to understand the significance and practical implications of new materialism in relation to a formalist art practice. In the expansive and often wordless creative realm of my studio, different aspects of the research arose and manifested themselves in the work, either through the sheer physicality and confrontation with material, the way in which painting becomes a three-dimensional activity, the tensions between the made and unmade, the indeterminate nature of abstraction, and the joyful freedom of colour that is both of the world, and outside the world of rational thought. The iterative stages of research and development in the studio began as object-based enquiries, then painting-based enquiries, then the two combined to form object and painting-based enquiries in the later stages of the project. Throughout all these chapters and stages, a creative tension has maintained a separation between the written thesis and the practical projects, that has at times been critical in allowing the work to be the work, and at times nearly compromised the project in terms of its separateness and seeming disconnection to the thesis.

In nearing the end of the PhD project, the significance of the physical works of art began to clarify through its very relations and tensions with the theoretical aspect of the thesis. The practical aspect of the work was to bring objects and paintings into relation with each other through formalist concerns. The resulting dialogues between paint and object slip between formalist sculpture and non-art. It was the uncomfortable in between-ness, and resistance to easily readable metaphors or links to the external world, that at once posed problems for the work but which also

[185] Amy Sillman, *'On Colour'* in in Graw, I. & Lajer-Burcharth, E. *Painting beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition.* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016) p.115

highlighted its strengths. This in between-ness seemed to point at the very ideas ruminating behind autonomous, agential artworks. They remain aloof in their unwillingness to be instantly decoded and made sense of. The works recall Paul Chan's observation that 'the subjective nature of our vision does not hamper what we see, as much as highlight how what is perceivable is bound to internal states as expressed in thoughts and feelings.'[186] This might make things difficult for an audience, as well as me, in that we are both stifled in our attempts to decode what is going on in the work. Any exchange between the audience and me as a maker is less about a didactic relationship of sharing a specific message, and more about an open-ended experience centred on the materiality of paint and found objects. There is a tussle at play in the works, as they also represent a point of indexical relations to other things, ideas, metaphors and so on. These are relations that are inescapable, as artworks cannot seem to escape the human bind of having meaning apprehended from them. From the beginning of this project, I've been careful in not explicitly pointing my audience towards any specific concept, or idea, related to the objects I've been working with. Chan again observes, 'the more self-regarding an artwork is about what it wants to achieve, the more totalising a work appears.'[187] A large driving force behind the thesis has been an attempt not to overmine or undermine objects, not to explain things away through either their relations to wider cultural discussion or deconstruct them through their own constituent parts.

In answer to Andrew Poe's question of whether there exists an aesthetic dimension to things in a new materialist discourse, there are several key findings. In working directly with material for the duration of this project, it is clear that creative practices and the resulting aesthetic experiences are emergent in nature and are the results of ongoing interactions between humans and materials. Through its capacity to generate forms, shapes, patterns, and textures by relating with other elements and entities, materiality itself is inherently creative. It would be a great mistake to claim that creativity is solely a human pursuit, and solely a pursuit that humans can apprehend. In this sense the artwork does not necessarily prove a limiting factor to new materialism, in that the aesthetic dimensions of things are intricately wound up and tethered to our daily material existence. The paintings and sculpture explored in this thesis present a provocation as to whether 'things' are independently acting agents, and that may be read as more of a spectrum of agency rather than a binary yes/ no response. However, the particularities of individual artworks may necessarily impose limits to the extent that materiality can be theorised in a universal sense. Artworks themselves, and the matter of which they are constructed, highlight the irreducibly contextual nature of matter and materiality, and this is also where the formalist thesis runs into problems. We simply cannot separate the artwork from its broader cultural and institutional contexts. As for the human bind, there is an

[186] Chan, On Rachel Harrison,' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9a5EFpicCUM [accessed 10/08/23]
[187] Ibid.

inevitable inescapability to our structures as humans who apprehend objects and desire meaning, but that doesn't mean that formalist painters interested in new materialist discourses are inherently bound to fail in their endeavours. It means that the slippages between the object in and of itself, and our meaning making modes make the artwork in a more well-rounded, complex and flowing entity, as it moves continuously in and out of our line of sight and understanding. One of Philip Guston's statements has stayed with me throughout these years and resonates deeply with the final culminations of the project, that of the refusal to allow things to 'vanish into recognition'[188]. My methodology of painting, veiling, covering, and marking objects is undeniably authorship, a subjective act in the extreme, along with it arguably belonging in an elitist and privileged white cube setting. However, it is vital in that it changes a plank of wood, or a tool, or a bit of driftwood, into something other than what it is. I simply can't make works which 'vanish into recognition.'

One of the main points of learning from the project has been the acknowledgement that objects are not only something phenomenal for the onlooker, but also have an intrinsic, internal logic to themselves. This came about when aspects of new materialist discourse on interactive agency manifested itself in the studio, and the lives of things as autonomous objects became clearer to me from this perspective. Rather than meaning being something that we apprehend as humans, we can shift towards an understanding of meaning as being the result of an imaginative interaction unfolding between human and non-human, or more-than-human, parties. Instead of imagination being something that is only located within the human head, we shift towards understanding imagination as being located in and exchanged with the real world. When we stop thinking that the primary role of art is to merely communicate knowledge about a particular subject matter, we can start to explore the cognitive activities that are translated through art in imaginative, non-literal terms. In Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset's *An Essay in Esthetics by Way of a Preface* (1914) he introduces the idea that it was not just humans that had a noumenal dimension, but objects too[189]. He says:

> 'Now then, imagine the importance of a language or system of expressive signs whose function was not to tell us about things but to present them to us in the act of executing themselves. Art is just such a language; this is what art does. The esthetic object is inwardness as such – it is each thing as 'I'.'[190]

[188] Guston, p.42
[189] Harman, OOO, p.69
[190] Harman, OOO, p.71

Rather than pitting the analysis and critique of abstract sculptures and thinking processes located in the head, against the wordless, physical and material processes that are led by the body, we can value the exchange and correspondence that each offer to the other. In this sense the artwork is a meeting place where the knowing that emerges from the inside, through interoceptive engagement with external stimuli, finds shape, texture and meaning through cultural critique and dialogue.

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