

Notes

- 1 A. Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford, 1998.
- 2 Gell, *Art and Agency*, 6.
- 3 See David Carroll, *Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida*, London, 1987, 24.
- 4 M. Rampley, 'Art History and Cultural Difference: Alfred Gell's Anthropology of Art', *Art History*, 28: 4, 2005, 524–51.
- 5 In a country like Mexico, for example, whose past was tainted by the 'barbaric' undertones of its pre-Hispanic past, neoclassicism helped to portray this history through an aura of universality. See my doctoral dissertation 'Civilizing the prehispanic: neo-prehispanic imagery and constructions of nationhood in Porfirian Mexico (1876–1919)', Camberwell College of Arts, University of the Arts, London, 2005.
- 6 E. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London, 1995 [1978].
- 7 One of the most interesting studies in relation to Latin American visual culture has been presented by Deborah Poole in her book *Vision, Race and Modernity: a Visual Economy of the Andean Image World*, Princeton, 1997. Following an anthropological approach, Poole discusses the agency of images, and the flow and exchange of ideas between Europe and the Andes, exposing the way in which images of racial difference were constructed as a consequence of this exchange.

MATERIAL MATTERS

Materialästhetik. Quellentexte zu Kunst, Design und Architektur, edited by Dietmar Rübel, Monika Wagner and Vera Wolff, Berlin: Reimer Verlag, 2005, 351 pp., 20 b. & w. illus., € 29.90 pbk.

In the discipline of art history, 'material' is a neglected category. Following a long tradition of preferring 'form' over 'matter', scholarly analysis usually takes for granted the role of material in the visual arts. Thus, 'material' is usually understood as a medium, a vehicle for form, which serves to elevate it into the lofty realm of art. If addressed, the physical constituents of art works tend to be approached from the perspective of technical history.¹ While the knowledge of the production of bronze, the use of marble or the processing of pigments has long been the trusty handmaiden of connoisseurship and has led to considerable advancements in dating, categorizing and appreciating art works, it is not necessarily sufficient to understand a history of ideas in art. It follows, then, that technical accounts of materials in art usually content themselves with economically valuable materials: bronze and gold, granite and porphyry, marble and alabaster, ebony and ivory, and so on. Defined by their rarity, such collections of materials usually get supplemented by those of more common origins, adhering to the notion that the artist's hand transcends base matter into artistic form: clay, wax, terracotta. Any such set of materials of art has shortcomings.

Methodologically, such a canon tends to perpetuate a given hierarchy of materials without questioning its origin. Historically, such selection has little to offer once traditional materials of art get supplemented, or substituted, by non-traditional materials: the use of cast iron in the applied arts and architecture, of aluminium in Tatlin's *Counter-Reliefs*, of charcoal in *Arte Povera* or of latex in the works of Eva Hesse cannot be assessed by reverting to technical history alone. Once industrial production separates the design from the making of the object, any examination of the meaning of materials that is mainly concerned with a history of craftsmanship is at a loss.

Consequently, most art-historical explanations following such accounts of material stop somewhere in the nineteenth century. This is where *Materialästhetik* starts. A highly knowledgeable anthology of contextualized sources, this volume does not merely look at technical phenomenology. Instead, it thoroughly investigates the aesthetic discourses surrounding materials since the beginnings of the industrial revolution. The fruit of many years of research, the compact volume succeeds on several levels. By bringing together sources from the applied arts, the 'fine' arts and architecture, it highlights the interdependencies of artistic disciplines. Structured synchronically according to themes such as 'Nature as Material', 'Material, Region, Nation' or 'Material and Gender', yet balanced by a diachronic selection of sources within these themes, the book is exemplary in its astute argument. Most of all, *Materialästhetik* proves how prolific the research into the historical debates on materials can be and how overlooked this has been in the 'visual' sciences so far. It is a seminal book and will provide scholars with insight as well as with ample material for further research.

It is relevant to note that *Materialästhetik* is not concerned with what has come to be called 'Material Culture'. The book's interest is decidedly one of art history, and while it will be of great use to many other fields in the humanities, it is in the category of 'materials' that the discipline can prove its methodological aptness and flexibility. 'Material Culture' is primarily a term developed in ethnography and anthropology. In his essay 'On the Evolution of Culture' (1875), the anthropologist Augustus H. Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers considers Material Culture to be the 'outward signs of particular ideas of the mind'.² Accordingly, its theoretical reflection has been mainly concerned with notions of 'culture'. While 'culture' has attracted attention and reflective awareness early on in anthropological and related disciplines,³ its notion of 'material' remains unclear. Interchangeably used for 'thing', 'artefacts', 'products' and the like,⁴ it has become a 'super-category of objects'.⁵ Put neither into historical nor conceptual perspective, such imprecise use of the term 'material' is of little use to scholarship in art history. In a brief venture into the 'materials' of Material Culture, Thomas Schlereth writes:

Although the scope of material in material culture continues to be expanded in various directions, this does not mean that it includes a totally unrestricted spectrum of all possible objects. Human agency is either implicit or explicit in all the definitions we have been examining. Therefore, natural objects such as trees, fossils, or skeletons are usually excluded from definitions of material culture on the grounds that they are not man-made or man-modified objects. However, when natural objects are encountered in a cultural pattern that suggests human activity [...] these are examples of natural materials that have become materials of culture.⁶

This illustrates the problem which the concept of 'Material Culture' presents to the context of art history: its notion of 'materials' is merely that of manufactured products. Presupposing a naturalized, self-explanatory status of un-processed matter,

it does not regard the historical and discursive qualities of materials itself. The volume *Materialästhetik* does just that.

Here, 'material' does not designate products alone, but all natural and artificial substances which are intended to be used and manipulated. This important difference in concept acknowledges the general historicity of artistic practices far more accurately: whenever a certain material, be it bone, bronze or Brillo-Pads, is chosen for an art work, the history of its cultural usage has to be taken aboard in defining its meaning. When looking closely at this usage, one can identify a recurring pattern for this. Continuously drawing on Platonist and Aristotelian idealism, the Western tradition of aesthetics strives for a transcending of low, everyday 'material' by means of high, artistic 'form'.⁷ Describing the palace of Apollo in his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid praises its gold, silver and jewels. As fine as those might be, however, in the end, *materiam superbat opus* – the matter is surpassed by the final art work.⁸ This notion of artistic transcendence is echoed by Leon Battista Alberti in the second book of his treatise *De Pictura*:

Ivory, gems and all other precious things are made more valuable by the hand of the painter. Gold, too, when embellished by the art of painting, is equal in value to a far larger quantity of gold. Even lead, the basest of metals, if it were formed into some image by the hand of Phidias or Praxiteles, would probably be regarded as more precious than rough unworked silver.⁹

Until the 1800s it was this very notion of surpassing the constituting substances by means of artistic design, which 'differentiated the artwork from other objects in which materials, on grounds of their value, their functional qualities or their semantics could be of importance'.¹⁰

The nineteenth century brought a fundamental change. Along with the industrial revolution came the separation of design from production as well as the development and discovery of new materials, such as cast iron, gum elastic or cellulose. Cast iron thoroughly changed traditional perceptions of architectural space. Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace and Gustave Eiffel's tower epitomize a shift which took place not only in technical, but also in aesthetic terms. While the technical characteristics of cast iron changed the possibilities of dealing with architectural volumes, at the same time phenomenologically flexible, literally 'plastic' materials found their way into the applied arts. Cellulose, paper-surrogates and processed caoutchouc could be made to look like a whole number of other products, their presumed 'imitation' giving rise to Sullivan's famous 1896 dictum of 'form follows function.' While the category of 'form' in the wake of the industrial revolution has often been analysed, the role of materials has been curiously under-researched, even the more so by art historians. This is surprising, as it was mainly on aesthetic grounds that the new materials were criticized. As the authors of *Materialästhetik* point out, the 'uncertainty caused by the materials of the industrialisation led to fundamental re-assessments in aesthetic theory.'¹¹ Here, the notion of 'truth to materials' developed, finding its way from architecture and the applied arts into the 'fine arts'. It is one of the major achieve-

ments of *Materialästhetik* to elucidate how this development originates not only in the twentieth, but already in the nineteenth century.

The book does so by dividing its rich array of sources into ten chapters. With their chronologically set-up texts, these chapters relate the category of material to major themes and are ample proof of the versatility and productiveness of their field of interest. Each chapter is introduced by the team of authors, who make sources from a wide variety of disciplines available to art-historical research. The chapter 'Nature as Material' is the adequate opening to this selection of texts. Choosing texts varying from the eighteenth-century authority of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to Karl Marx, John Ruskin and up to Jean Baudrillard and Joseph Beuys, the authors demonstrate how the connection between natural and man-made shapes has over time been constantly debated in relation to materials.

When Goethe in 1788 reflects on the proximity of the shape of Egyptian obelisks to that of the local formations of granite, he effectively encourages artistic legitimization of form on 'natural' grounds, thus preceding the nineteenth-century argument of a 'truth to materials'. This naturalization of form is contrasted with the Marxist analysis of the transformation of materials into goods by means of human labour. Such contrast of historic sources proves especially insightful when supplemented with documents by more recent authors, such as Robert Smithson's 1968 text on Land Art. *Materialästhetik's* previously presented discourses resonate heavily with the reader when assessing Smithson's comments on 'abstract geology' or 'conceptual crystallizations', for he is an artist who uses earth and minerals as his raw 'material'. The book's careful selection of source texts make the volume valuable to scholars of a variety of interests. Consider the chapters 'Materials, Region, Nation' and 'Material and Gender': they exemplify the wide range of subjects to which the category of 'materials' can be shown to be of importance, whilst rigorously sticking to precise historical methodology. 'Materials, Region, Nation' presents texts highlighting the process of charging the materials' semantics with constructions of regional and national identity. While Frank Lloyd Wright's musings about the 'American' materials of Taliesin sound rather benevolent, a 1937 text by Albert Speer illustrates the importance of materials for national socialist aesthetics, instrumentalizing 'natural' semantics effectively to justify the reserving of iron and steel for war production at an early stage. Assembling texts from such different authors as Otto Weininger, Sigmund Freud and Carolee Schneemann, the chapter 'Material and Gender' traces the continuing tradition in Western culture to perceive material and form (or matter and form) along the lines of gender codes. Critically adroit, its selection of texts alone gives enough incentive and methodological example to inspire several research papers, a fact that is reflected in previous publications by authors of the editorial group.¹²

Other chapters use their source texts to trace the changing discourses over materials in regards to 'Style', 'Imitation of Material' or 'Form'. Interestingly, the potential inherent in these heated aesthetic debates only gained significance in the fine arts relatively late in the twentieth century. Here, the authors assemble important Russian texts by members of the early Soviet avant garde. It was in the disciplines of

architecture and the applied arts that these debates erupted at first. The influence of Gottfried Semper in particular is highlighted by the authors to good measure. Semper, best known to English-speaking audiences today as architect of the Dresden *Frauenkirche*, is here cited in his important capacity as critic and theoretician. Semper's 1860 book *Der Stil*, until its recent translation largely forgotten to an English-speaking audience, was highly influential in Britain in his time.¹³ In it, Semper describes the development of form and ornament in the applied arts according to the materials and their functional use. The assigning of such a central role to the aesthetically marginalized category of materials, the authors of *Materialästhetik* show, was heavily attacked. Labelled 'materialistic' and even 'Darwinist', Semper's theory was refuted, not least by Alois Riegl, who argued for a *Kunstwollen* instead.

Materialästhetik is at its best when presenting to the reader all these different, diverging and yet interconnected discourses in a concise, contextualized way. The discerningly selected source texts prove the validity of the so-far neglected research into the materials of art, design and architecture. At the same time, the editorial comments never patronize the reader; rather they frame the sources in a coherent argument, well enough thought out to inspire further research. Even in the final chapter, 'Materials of the Immaterial', the authors refrain from any comments conveying what would be righteous anger in the face of recurring claims to 'immateriality' in contemporary art, when beholders are actually forced to deal with more 'materials' in the form of projectors, computers and audio systems than ever before. Instead, *Materialästhetik*, with admirable restraint, addresses any claims to 'immateriality' in a thorough, art-historical manner. The term 'immaterial' is traced back to its origins in religious contexts and connected to the very notion of transcendence outlined in earlier chapters. Drawing on texts by Kasimir Malevich, Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein and Jacques Derrida, the authors can consequently establish a history of use of the term that illuminates its semantic changes and continuities. In this way, the chapter's central texts from the catalogue of Jean-Francois Lyotard's 1985 exhibition '*Les Immatériaux*' can be assessed with regard to the question of how 'digital media of the post-modern age relate to the old opposition of materials and their transcendence'.¹⁴ For all the new media art's clamour, the need to ennoble the new art works by calling them 'immaterial' recurs to the hierarchical duality 'matter/form' of old, leaving little news in material matters: *materiam superbat opus*.

Materialästhetik is the product of the better part of a ten-year research project at the University of Hamburg's Art History department. Here, the 'Archive for the Research of Material Iconography' has established a photo archive documenting the change in the usage of materials in the arts, a database with a plethora of information on sources and literature as well as a considerable library of monographic and thematic publications. The archive and its researchers have brought forward numerous research papers, MA and PhD theses, as well as various publications on the meaning of material in the arts. Almost all of these, just as the book under review, are published in German and have had far too few readers in English-speaking countries. While the selection of texts in *Materialästhetik* focuses on German sources, their

inclusion is always based on their illumination of the subject matter and its premise is of truly international concern. Instead of devoting yet another conference to the technical history of the polishing of marble or the moulding of clay, it is high time the discourses of the different materials in art as such were more closely looked at. *Materialästhetik* sets a splendid example in so doing.

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Notes

- 1 See Jack C. Rich, *The Materials and Methods of Sculpture*, New York, 1947 and Nicholas Penny, *The Materials of Sculpture*, New Haven and London, 1993.
- 2 J.L. Myers, ed., *A. Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers: 'On the Evolution of Culture and other Essays'*, Oxford, 1906 and quoted in Thomas Schlereth, 'Material Culture and Cultural Research' in Thomas Schlereth, ed., *Material Culture. A Research Guide*, Kansas, 1985, 1.
- 3 See Alfred L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concept and Definitions*, New York; 1963, Schlereth, 'Material Culture', Victor Buchli, ed., *The Material Culture Reader*, Oxford and New York, 2002.
- 4 Schlereth, 'Material Culture'.
- 5 Buchli, *Material Culture Reader*, 3.
- 6 Schlereth, 'Material Culture', 5.
- 7 Quoted in Monika Wagner, 'Material', in Karlheinz Barck et al., eds, *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe*, Stuttgart and Weimar, 2001, 871.
- 8 Wagner, 'Material', 867.
- 9 See Cecil Grayson, ed., *Leon Battista Alberti: On Painting and On Sculpture. The Latin texts of de Pictura and De Statua*, London, 1972, 61; Wagner, 'Material', 872.
- 10 Wagner, 'Material', 868.
- 11 Rübél et al, eds, *Materialästhetik*, 10.
- 12 See Monika Wagner, *Sack und Asche: Materialgeschichten aus der Hamburger Kunsthalle*, Hamburg, 1997; Monika Wagner, *Das Material der Kunst: eine andere Geschichte der Moderne*, München, 2001.
- 13 Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten, oder praktische Aesthetik*, Frankfurt a.M., 1860, translated as *Style in the technical and tectonic arts, or, Practical aesthetics*, Introduction by Harry Francis Mallgrave, trans. Francis Mallgrave and Michael Robinson, Los Angeles, 2004. For Semper's influence, see Owen Jones, *An apology for the colouring of the Greek court in the Crystal Palace. With arguments by G.H. Lewes and W. Watkiss Lloyd, an extract from the report of the Committee appointed to examine the Elgin Marbles in 1836, ... and a fragment on the origin of polychromy, by Professor Semper*, London, 1854.
- 14 Rübél et al, eds, *Materialästhetik*, 324.

INSTALLATION ART

Installation Art: A Critical History by Claire Bishop, London: Tate Publishing, 2005, 144 pp., 70 col. plates, 20 b. & w. illus, £18.99 pbk

Installation Art in the New Millennium: The Empire of the Senses by Nicolas De Oliveira, Nicola Oxley and Michael Petry (texts by Nicolas De Oliveira), London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 2004, 208 pp., 269 col. plates, 48 b. & w. illus., £19.95 pbk

Rachel Whiteread, *Embankment* (Unilever Series), London: Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, Bankside, 11 October 2005–2 April 2006

Rachel Whiteread's installation, called *Embankment* and part of the ongoing Unilever Series, was stationed in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern. The work comprised over