
Materiality, Materialism and Conceptuality in Art and Society

A discussion of processes involved in art practice, and their relationship to philosophy and social change

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Essay Summary

The essay looks at the meaning of art in a social and political context. It follows a thread of history showing the relationship of art to society and politics, and identifies cultural perspectives - materiality and conceptuality – to develop the concept of art as a philosophy without words.

We arrive at a sense of art and culture as immanent, embedded in society, and offering an alternative value system to postmodernism's 'capitalist realism'.



Anselm Kiefer *La Berceuse* (2010)

A magnificent embodiment of the relationship between materiality and conceptuality is Kiefer's *La Berceuse* (2010).¹ It is photographed above, installed in front of Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, 1624 at the Reichsmuseum, Amsterdam.²

Kiefer's sculpture has been placed in front of Rembrandt's painting, and frames it as materiality frames the conceptual. The *Night Watch* is a premonition of Enlightenment values and concepts, depicting bourgeois men setting off to enforce property rights. They are contained, in this installation, by Kiefer's sculpture, a mysterious, earthy thing, composed of huge dried sunflowers. The sunflowers form a chaotic matrix of greyish stuff, possibly symbolising the ineffable stuff of the cosmos.

The sunflowers may yet be coloured by human senses and aesthetic process, since Kiefer's work *La Berceuse* references Vincent Van Gogh, famous for sunflower paintings. Van Gogh's painting *La Berceuse* is an exercise in the materiality of paint, combined with concepts of colour theory and maternal comfort.³ Also referenced are Van Gogh's *Chair* paintings. Both *La Berceuse* and the *Chairs* were painted in the aftermath of Van Gogh's argument with Gauguin - about whether painting was best done from life or from imagination.⁴

¹ Reviewed in ArtNews: <http://www.artnews.com/2011/08/15/kiefer-on-night-watch/>

² Photo Credit: Art Stack - <https://theartstack.com/artist/anselm-kiefer/la-berceuse>

³ Van Gogh's *La Berceuse*: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2002/jun/29/art>,

⁴ Van Gogh and Gauguin: <http://www.artcyclopedia.com/feature-2001-11.html>

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1. Introduction

This essay asks about the purpose of art, in relation to society.

It looks at the materiality, and conceptuality, in humanities and art practice. It suggests we might compare art to philosophy: a dialogue or investigation of our being. Whereas philosophy engages in dialogue using words (and concepts) to build logical arguments; at least some of arts' dialogue occurs without words, concepts or logic. Such non-conceptual dialogue might include empathy or intuition and materiality.

Materiality is a perspective that sees materials as a factor in shaping the human experience, in anthropology, sociology and art. This invites comparison with

Marx's materialist perspective. However, materiality is materialism deconstructed by postmodernism - it allows for something outside logic.

This introduces the intriguing possibility of art practice as a way of addressing the postmodern condition, by providing an alternative value to pure materialism.

The essay starts out examining a particular thread of art, politics and philosophy to show how closely interwoven they are, and to reveal processes of materiality and conceptuality. It then discusses these processes. It concludes that (art) practice might offer an alternative value system to capitalism.

2. The entwining of Art and Society

In this section I follow a thread of history by discussing the work of artists in the context of politics and cultural theory. I demonstrate that art, society and philosophy are entwined, and identify core processes of Materiality and Conceptuality.

2.1 Avant-Garde, vanguard and Marxism

The French revolution of 1789 was defined and inspired by modernist thinking that promoted equality and the rights of man. While Romantics protested against some social and spiritual consequences of modernism, rational thinkers proposed further radical reforms, so the horrors of industrial age could be mitigated.⁵

Artists and writers were seen as visionaries in the vanguard of social change. The first use of the term 'avant-garde' - as a movement calling on artists to promote radical reforms in society - was by a member of the early socialist utopian movement lead by St Simone. In 1825, Olinde Rodrigues called on artists to "serve as [the people's] avant-garde ... the power of the arts is the most immediate and fastest way" to social, political and economic reform.⁶

The term 'vanguard' came to refer those promoting new ideas, in all areas of society.⁷ Art movements such as impressionism, cubism, futurism, suprematism and constructivism pursued new forms of visual representation.

⁵ 'Social manifestations of the Enlightenment, such as science, capitalism and industrialism, caused a reaction in the nineteenth century, identified as Romanticism. "Modernity divided man from himself by enforcing the duality between reason and sensibility and severed the individual from his natural social relations ... it also alienated man from nature. Modern science ... was regarded as the main culprit".' Gorodeisky, Keren, "19th Century Romantic Aesthetics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) 1.

⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avant-garde>

⁷ Sascha Bru and Gunther Martens, *The Invention of Politics in the European Avant-Garde* (1906–1940) (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), p. 21. [in <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avant-garde>

Karl Marx combined socialist ideas with materialist philosophy and Hegel's 'dialectical' method, to propose a philosophical framework for social change. Materialism (discussed in detail later in this essay) says the cosmos is made of matter, which determines everything, including consciousness. It rejects the idealistic, dualistic philosophy of Kant (which claims a transcendent dimension where god and artist genius can exist, superior to matter). Marx's dialectical materialism allows him to propose that materialism, rather than human consciousness, defines society. Capitalism and the class system is an inevitable outcome – and revolution is the inevitable outcome of such a system.⁸

While Marx left no major writings about the role of art in social change,⁹ Socialist realism and utopian art such as that of Diego Rivera expresses these ideas.

2.2 Post modern art: WWI, Duchamp and Dada

Concurrent with the evolution of Marxist materialism, Dada and the Surrealists continued the Romantic resistance to the social consequences of modernism. They challenged everything from social structures to language to the idea of what art is.

Dada was an almost nihilist reaction against the capitalist establishment and the slaughter of World War I. "We agreed that the war had been contrived by the various governments for the most autocratic, sordid and materialist reasons," said Carl Heulsenbeck, one of the founders of Dada in Switzerland, in 1917.¹⁰

⁸ 'The *Theses on Feuerbach* contain one of Marx's most memorable remarks: "the philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point is to change it" (thesis 11). In the first thesis Marx states his objections to 'all hitherto existing' materialism and idealism. Materialism is complimented for understanding the physical reality of the world, but is criticised for ignoring the active role of the human subject in creating the world we perceive. Idealism, at least as developed by Hegel, understands the active nature of the human subject, but confines it to thought or contemplation: the world is created through the categories we impose upon it. Marx combines the insights of both traditions to propose a view in which human beings do indeed create — or at least transform — the world they find themselves in, but this transformation happens not in thought but through actual material activity; not through the imposition of sublime concepts but through the sweat of their brow, with picks and shovels. This historical version of materialism, which transcends and thus rejects all existing philosophical thought, is the foundation of Marx's later theory of history. As Marx puts it in the 1844 Manuscripts, 'Industry is the real historical relationship of nature ... to man'. This thought, derived from reflection on the history of philosophy, together with his experience of social and economic realities, as a journalist, sets the agenda for all Marx's future work.' Wolff, Jonathan, "Karl Marx", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/marx/>>. 2.4. Theses on Feuerbach

⁹ 'Though Marx and Engels have left no major writings on art, their views in this field, when collected together, form a harmonious whole which is a logical extension of their scientific and revolutionary Weltanschauung'.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/subject/art/preface.htm>

¹⁰ Dawn Andes, Dada and Surrealism, *Concepts of Modern Art* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1994) 111.

Hugo Ball, another founder of Dada, wrote in 1920: "The Dadaist ... knows that this world of systems has gone to pieces, and that the age which demanded cash has organised a bargain sale of godless philosophies."¹¹

In 1917, French artist Marcel Duchamp defined the revolution against modernism and Kant's Enlightenment aesthetics, when he signed a mass-produced ceramic urinal, titled the work *Fountain*, and submitted it to an exhibition in New York organised by the Society of Independent Artists.¹²

Duchamp avoided being associated with political or art movements. In 1942, he said: 'Dada was an extreme protest against the physical side of painting. It was a metaphysical attitude'.¹³ He was more intellectual than political, interested in many aspects of culture from philosophy to physics, mathematics and aeronautics, and frequently stated that he preferred chess to art.

However, his re-categorisation of a urinal as an artwork took place against a background of cultural and political upheaval, in the year the USA joined World War I and communism toppled the Russian Tsar. *Fountain* is a statement about art, but also about social class, as it elevated a mundane article manufactured by the proletariat.

Duchamp's *Fountain* was chosen in 2004 as "the most influential artwork of the 20th century" by a survey of 500 artists and historians.¹⁴

The Surrealists who followed Dada "inherited the bourgeoisie as its enemy and continued its attack on traditional forms of art".¹⁵ The French Surrealists split over the issue of support for the Communist Party in 1932.¹⁶

2.3 Duchamp: art is defined by the artist, and validated by an audience

Duchamp's *Fountain* was rejected by exhibition organisers in 1917, but in the resulting publicity, the category of 'ready made' Art was born, as 'an ordinary object elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist.'¹⁷

¹¹ Dawn Andes, *Dada and Surrealism, Concepts of Modern Art* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1994) 111.

¹² Caroline Cros, *Marcel Duchamp* (London, Reaktion Books 2006) 47.

¹³ Marcel Duchamp, in *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1946. <http://www.dadart.com/dadaism/dada/035a-duchamp-cage.html>

¹⁴ The opinion poll naming *Fountain* as the most influential work was commissioned for the Turner Prize in 2004. Charlotte Higgins, "Work of art that inspired a movement ... a urinal" (*The Guardian* 2 December 2004)

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2004/dec/02/arts.artsnews1>.

¹⁵ Dawn Andes, *Dada and Surrealism, Concepts of Modern Art* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1994) 122

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surrealism#Internal_politics

¹⁷ This first definition of "readymade" appeared in André Breton and Paul Éluard's *Dictionnaire abrégé du Surréalisme*, published under the name of Marcel Duchamp (or his initials, "MD," to be precise). André Gervais asserts that Breton wrote this particular dictionary entry. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Readymades_of_Marcel_Duchamp

In effect, Duchamp refuted Kant's ideas that a mysterious quality of 'genius' and sense of 'taste' was needed to produce and appreciate art. Any artist can define anything as being of Art. In other words: ordinary things are transformed into Art by human action – at least by the action of choosing, identifying, and proposing by the artist.

Duchamp updated his ideas in 1957 when he added that Art needs an audience, who agrees that it is Art.¹⁸ Further, art must stand the test of time, to be accepted into culture - books, criticism and institutions. If it does not, then it will be forgotten.

For Duchamp, Art became the idea or concept of Art shared by an artist and audience – a social group. The art is conceptual rather existing in Materiality.

That person, the artist, can be anyone. As Joseph Beuys famously declared: 'every human is an artist'.¹⁹

By the late 1960s, Duchamp's ideas led to Conceptualism. Conceptualism was a break with Formalism: the modernist, Kantian (and Greenbergian) notion that everything necessary for understanding Art is contained within the physical artwork – the context of the artwork, such as underlying concept, is of secondary importance.

2.4 Greenberg: the persistence of autonomous art

Even as Duchamp's ideas were being expressed as Conceptualism, Kant's ideas of artistic genius and pure form enjoyed new life. American critic Clement Greenberg used Formalism to analyse modern art – and to reject political art as 'kitsch', alongside any other art that was overtly ideological or conceptual.²⁰

Greenberg's search for an essential artistic originality in art was drawn from Kant's ideas of artistic genius, a position of cultural elitism that required 'taste'. Greenberg demanded that artists strive to reveal this elusive 'original' artistic

¹⁸ 'The Creative Act', 1957 (Duchamp's lecture in Houston, April 1957); as quoted in Art News, 56. no. 4, Summer 1957, p. 28–29. In April 1957 at the American Federation of Arts in Houston, Texas, Marcel Duchamp gave a talk 'The Creative Act'. He said: 'Let us consider ... the two poles of the creation of art: the artist on the one hand, and on the other the spectator who later becomes the posterity ... the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives a final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists'. (https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Marcel_Duchamp).

¹⁹ Jochen Littkemann, Press Release for Beuys retrospective: Utopia at the Stag Monuments, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London, 17 Apr 2018 - 16 Jun 2018. <https://ropac.net/exhibition/utopia-at-the-stag-monuments>

²⁰ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" *Partisan Review* 6 (Paris, Fall 1939)

essence by stripping away non-essential elements (including concepts).

²¹Greenberg's demand for 'purity' of Form ultimately led to Minimalism.

Possibly, Greenberg's ideas were popular because they reflected growing reaction against Stalinism, and communist witch hunts of 1950's America. They gave progressive artists a theoretical framework for radicalism that excluded communism. Greenberg celebrated Picasso as an original artist before he painted *Guernica* and joined the French Communist party – and after this date, dismissed Picasso as a declining force.²²

Greenberg's search for an essential artistic originality in art was drawn from Kant's ideas of artistic genius, a position of cultural elitism that required 'taste'. Greenberg demanded that artists strive to reveal an 'authentic' artistic essence by stripping away non-essential elements (including concepts). Greenberg's demand for 'purity' of Form ultimately led to Minimalism.

2.5 Conceptualism and the idea of pure concept as Art

Conceptualism was a reaction against the Formalism. In 1968, theorist Sol LeWitt declared: "What the work of art looks like isn't too important... it must begin with an idea."²³ The idea, or concept, alone could be Art.

In 1968, Laurence Weiner created an art book *Statements*, which was a description of art projects and was the end point; the art itself. Weiner wrote "(1) The artist may construct the piece. (2) The piece may be fabricated. (3) The piece may not be built. [Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.]"²⁴

2.6 Political Aesthetic: multiple readings of Carl Andre's Bricks

Art can be analysed in different frameworks simultaneously. The choice of framework reflects political attitudes.

For example, Carl Andre's pile of bricks, *Equivalent VIII* 1966, which was purchased by the Tate in 1976, is cited as an example of Minimalist Art, reducing art to the formal qualities of the medium.²⁵

But as well as being Minimalist, this art can also be viewed from a Materialist perspective. Andre himself described this work in these terms. A member of the anti-Vietnam war group, the Art Workers Coalition, he frequently referenced Marx. In a letter to the British journal *Studio International* in 1976, he wrote:

²¹ Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting", *Forum Lectures* (Washington: Voice of America, 1960)

http://www.yorku.ca/yamlau/readings/greenberg_modernistPainting.pdf

²² Claudia Mesch, *Art and Politics*, (New York, IB Tauris, 2013) 28.

²³ Sol LeWitt, *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, 1967

²⁴ <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/lawrence-weiner>

²⁵ <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/carl-andre-648>

“My work does joyfully celebrate the labour of others and the winning of human use value from indifferent matter”, and went on to quote from Marx: “Labour is the living fire that shapes the pattern”.²⁶

Thoughts about aesthetics and politics were present in Andre’s process, and he also physically interacted with various materials in meditative fashion. This entwining of conceptuality and materiality in Carl Andre’s practice is described in Alistair Rider’s PhD Thesis.²⁷

2.7 Artist as Social Activist – Joseph Beuys

Joseph Beuys admired Marcel Duchamp but admonished his ‘silence’. Beuys wanted art to engage with society in a progressive way; he believed the creative process could help evolve individuals and they would then build a better society. He wanted to eliminate the barriers between art and life in a creative process ‘social sculpture’, a collaborative performance that changes society.²⁸

The most ambitious of these projects, *7,000 Oaks*, saw the planting of trees together with symbolic stone posts in Kassel. This was envisaged, announced and performed as a cooperative art project at Documenta VII in 1982, and has inspired similar exercises around the world. It was not simply an initiative to plant trees, but to engage the community in a creative process of personal and social consciousness-raising.²⁹

‘Politics calls for a concept of creativity and culture that truly embraces human beings and makes them aware of how the whole can be conceived,’ Beuys said in 1985.³⁰

Beuys saw creativity as a universal principle extending beyond traditional art activities into all areas of human production. He believed in the ‘revolutionary power of art to unlock the potential for creativity in everyone, and in this way to transform society’. Beuys’ ‘utopian vision of social transformation through individual creativity and self-determination was expressed through his art, but also through actions, lectures and sustained political activism.’³¹

Beuys believed creative process is essential to the personal transformation necessary for social transformation. For Beuys, this creative process was art practice embedded in materiality, using painting, sculpture, print and natural and manufactured materials. The output of his social sculpture was material

²⁶ Petra Lange-Berndt, *Materiality*, (London/Cambridge USA, Whitechapel Gallery/MIT Press, 2015) 68-69.

²⁷ Alistair Rider, *Carl Andre, Sculptures, Politics, 1959-1976* (PhD Leeds University 2005) http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/1643/1/uk_bl_ethos_421980.pdf

²⁸ Allan Antliff, *Joseph Beuys*, (London, Phaidon Press 2014) 65.

²⁹ Allan Antliff, *Joseph Beuys*, (London, Phaidon Press 2014) 126.

³⁰ Allan Antliff, *Joseph Beuys*, (London, Phaidon Press 2014) 125.

³¹ Jochen Littkemann, Press Release for Beuys retrospective: Utopia at the Stag Monuments, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London, 17 Apr 2018 - 16 Jun 2018. <https://ropac.net/exhibition/utopia-at-the-stag-monuments>

rather than word/concept based. Ideas would be drawn in chalk on the ground. Tree planting was accompanied by erecting stone monuments. Blackboards, rather than typed minutes, were the output of workshops. In 1974, he participated in the London Institute for Contemporary Arts (ICA) exhibition *Art into Society – Society into Art*, by engaging the public in collaborative workshops, resulting in 100 blackboards covered in social analysis and ‘possible futures’. These blackboards became an installation *Directive Forces*, exhibited in New York and now housed in Berlin’s Hamburger Bahnhof Museum.³²

Despite the materiality of Beuys work, it has roots in the conceptual. In 1947 he began studying Rudolf Steiner’s philosophy, and this underpins aspects of his work including shamanism and materiality. Steiner believed human’s capacity to learn ‘is an exercise in spiritual growth through creative thought, which extends our sense of selfhood beyond the realm of the physical into the realm of the spiritual’.³³

Because much of Beuys work was individual or collaborative performance, some artwork consists of the remains of workshops, actions and studio activities photographs and studio detritus.³⁴

Beuys made his ideas into a social reality. In 1971, he founded the Organisation for Direct Democracy through Referendum, which called for an end to party politics.³⁵ In January 1980, he participated in the founding of the Green Party in Germany³⁶, which was the first Green Party to rise to national prominence.

³² Allan Antliff, *Joseph Beuys*, (London, Phaidon Press 2014) 74.

³³ Allan Antliff, *Joseph Beuys*, (London, Phaidon Press 2014) 18.

³⁴ An exhibition of Beuys work in London, 2018, *Utopia at the Stag* monuments, was a reconstruction of one of Beuys’ last shows. It was transferred directly out of Beuys studio, in other words a sort of record of a work in progress. It features around twenty clay sculptures labelled as ‘animals’. The clay lumps are formless, looking like they had been randomly squeezed out of big tube. Visitors joked that they looked like faeces. Each form had a work tool in it.

Beuys’ political work has a high degree of conceptuality, but this studio work has a degree of materiality. It has no words, and defies aesthetic appreciation and critical analysis. It invites decoding. Clay is a metaphor for raw material – what animates the clay? What brings life to inanimate matter? The similarity to faeces points to the temporality of our human lives. The work tools show that it is human agency, human work that transforms raw material into art. A Marxist reading of the work might say it shows how human labour transforms the base materials of the world, simultaneously transforming the human being.

But the main part of this work, as in all his work, was the process, the live transformation. These lumps of clay are only what remains behind.

Utopia at the Stag Monuments, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London, 17 Apr 2018 - 16 Jun 2018. <https://ropac.net/exhibition/utopia-at-the-stag-monuments>

³⁵ Allan Antliff, *Joseph Beuys*, (London, Phaidon Press 2014) 70

³⁶ Allan Antliff, *Joseph Beuys*, (London, Phaidon Press 2014) 144

2.8 Materiality contains Conceptuality - Anselm Kiefer

Anselm Kiefer's work evolved from representation of political concepts, to deep materiality. The concepts, the politics remain the same, but they disappear into the materiality of the art. Materiality invites a different relationship with the audience – calling for empathy instead of logical appreciation.

Kiefer was a student of Beuys. In 1971, Beuys organised a protest against plans to destroy a forest near Dusseldorf, resulting in the photographic artwork *Save The Woods*, 1972. In the photograph, standing at the front by Beuys left shoulder, 'grasping his broom with near combative intent' is a bearded figure – the emerging artist Anselm Kiefer.

Both men have been criticised as fascist or neo Nazi sympathisers because they examined, through their art, the fascist past of their nation. Beuys supported Kiefer, approving of his early work – performance and photography of the artist making a fascist salute in his father's old uniform, in various historical locations. Kiefer remarked: 'Beuys said straight away it was a good action, and for him all action was art.'³⁷

In these early days, Kiefer also made illustrations of the symbolism and philosophy that underpinned Nazi ideology – a figure giving the Nazi salute in front of a forest, or of classical sculptures illustrating scenes from Germanic myth, or Wagner. Kiefer was born in the last year of the war, Beuys fought in the war.

Kiefer's early paintings are watercolour sketches, whose materiality is limited to the bare minimum to capture, record, and communicate an idea – the idea of trying to understand what fascism was all about.

Materiality was present from the start. In 1966, he spent three weeks mediating in monk's cell in the Corbusier designed monastery La Tourette, and 'discovered the spirituality of concrete'.³⁸

During the course of his life, materiality was to come to the foreground. "When I use objects and substances such as straw and lead I distil from their spirit ... I display and upheave it," Kiefer said in a 2007 interview.³⁹

Kiefer's practice has become a monument to Materiality. His studio is a huge warehouse filled with all manner of raw materials and artworks in various stages of fabrication and destruction, including demolition rubble. Much of the activity in this huge space might be considered alchemy – lead is melted, acid is poured over paintings in actions seemingly directed by intuition.⁴⁰

³⁷ Christain Weikop, "Forests of Myth", *Forests of Memory*, in *Anselm Kiefer*, (London, Royal Academy of Arts, 2014) 33

³⁸ Kathleen Soriano, *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, in *Anselm Kiefer*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2014, pg 21

³⁹ Kathleen Soriano, *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, in *Anselm Kiefer*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2014, pg 21

⁴⁰ Richard Davey, *In the beginning is end, and in the end the beginning*, in *Anselm Kiefer*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2014, pg 21

But conceptuality is always present in Kiefer's work, giving it the additional power of myth, symbol and spiritualism. In some cases, text appears within the work. Kiefer questions idealist myths at the same time as he uses them in his work.⁴¹

A compelling embodiment of the relationship between materiality and conceptuality is Kiefer's *La berceuse* (2010), which illustrates the front piece of this essay.

3. Materialism to Materiality: Philosophical elements of Art and Society

3.1 Materiality and Conceptuality

In this section I examine ideas emerging from Section 2 - ideas that are fundamental to human consciousness, to our experience of 'being in the world' – what Hegel called 'Dasein'.⁴² These fundamentals of philosophy underpin political ideas such as Materialism, and aesthetic ideas such as Materiality.

I use the terms Materiality and Conceptuality to describe what I see as the major processes forming art practice, and also shaping society.

Materiality has been a notion in the humanities since Pierre Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) challenged structuralism in social sciences.⁴³ In anthropology⁴⁴ and sociology⁴⁵ it is the idea that the material, physical environment determines personal choices and social structures, even when we are unaware of this due to our 'subject' focussed perspective.

In art, Materiality sees the Material (medium) as defining the possibilities available to the artist. For example, the artist might investigate Materiality in painting by reducing Conceptuality to a minimum so the material flow is unobstructed by the artist's intervention, as in Gerhard Richter's *Flow Paintings* (2013-14).⁴⁶

I coined the term Conceptuality to refer to the Conceptual qualities of these same social processes, as opposed to Materiality. I needed to introduce Conceptuality because the usual oppositional term to Materiality is Ideality – but Ideality is an

⁴¹ Christain Weikop, *Forests of Myth, forests of memory*, in *Anslem Kiefer*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2014, pg 40

⁴² Alexandra Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, (New York, Cornell University Press, 1980) 103. 'The World of Phenomena is what Hegel calls Dasein, empirical existence.' Literal translation: 'being there'.

⁴³ Daniel Miller, "Materiality: An Introduction", *Materiality*, (London, Duke University Press 2005)

⁴⁴ Daniel Miller, "Materiality: An Introduction", *Materiality*, (London, Duke University Press 2005)

⁴⁵ Daniel Nehring, *Sociology*, (New York, Routledge, 2013)

⁴⁶ <https://news.artnet.com/market/gerhard-richter-triumphs-at-marian-goodman-london-126647>

imprecise term - Idea sometimes means image-thought, or sometimes Idea means word-thought (Concept), or most often, Idea means any kind of Thought.

I distinguish between word-based, logical Thought (Concept), and non-word-based, non-logical Thought. One hand, we have logical (rational) frameworks built of words, and on the other hand – everything else. That everything else might include intuition, empathy or spirit, and also observed phenomena of the Material world. This dichotomy is described by Descartes' dualism of mind and matter. 'Idealists' such as Descartes believed the only thing we know exists for sure is Thought itself - the rest of the perceived world (phenomena) might be a dream.⁴⁷ (The Materialist perspective refutes this Idealist, dualist perspective).

However, we must be more precise than this: it is not just any kind of Thought that allows Descartes to ruminate on the meaning of life. It is word-based, abstract Thought (Concept) that allowed Descartes to build his philosophy.

Descartes didn't use the word Concept, but it appears to approximate his notion of 'primary ideas'.⁴⁸ 'Concepts are mental representations, abstract objects or abilities that make up the fundamental building blocks of thoughts and beliefs. They play an important role in all aspects of cognition.'⁴⁹

For the purposes of this essay, we might say consciousness includes thoughts of two kinds: Concepts - abstract, word-based thoughts that can be used in logical dialogue and conceptual frameworks; and Ideas (all the non-word Thoughts such images, feelings and intuition).

3.2 Materialism

Materialism is a philosophical view of being (ontology) that says Matter is the fundamental substance of the cosmos, and everything, including consciousness and spirituality, is (a product of this) Matter.

The advance of science has modified notions of what Matter really is. Albert Einstein showed matter and energy are inter-convertible with his famous formula $E=mc^2$. Matter, in all its various forms, is energy.

⁴⁷ The dream argument is the postulation that the act of dreaming provides preliminary evidence that the senses we trust to distinguish reality from illusion should not be fully trusted. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dream_argument

⁴⁸ Descartes divided ideas into various categories: 'Some of my thoughts are as it were the images of things, and it is only in these cases that the term "idea" is strictly appropriate.' (eds. C. Adam & P. Tannery, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, (Paris: 1897–1910 and 1964–1978; Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1996) VII 36–7; CSM II 25–6), quoted in <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes-ideas/#Primeideas>

⁴⁹ This definition is taken from Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Concept> that summarises the detailed discussion in: Margolis, Eric and Laurence, Stephen, "Concepts", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/concepts/>>.

This is in opposition to the Idealist position that says a person's Ideas or Concepts are the only phenomenon that person can be certain of – the perception of a Material world may be a dream.

When rationalism brought Enlightenment to the West, Descartes and Kant described the perspective of Idealism, which sees the material world as a phenomenon of consciousness. But Spinoza rejected this 'idealist' position, instead describing the cosmos as consisted of only 'one single substance which possesses both the attribute of thought and the attribute of extension. The mind and body ... do not belong in different worlds ... they are inseparable.'⁵⁰

There are a variety of outcomes to Materialism as a perspective. In popular use, 'materialist' refers to a person who values material possessions highly, eg compared to environmentalism or spirituality.

Materialism is also the basis for Empiricism, the epistemology behind science, which requires that all knowledge must be proved by repeatable observation of the material world, that can be validated by others.

Karl Marx's the dialectical method developed by Hegel to analyse history from a Materialist perspective. He argued that material conditions determine human action, human labour modifies the world, accumulation of property defines social relations, leads to the inequalities of capitalism, and to inevitable revolution, when the history of competitive struggle would end and a utopian socialism would dawn.

The Materialist perspective allowed Marx to reject the Idealist notion of a natural order of transcendent spirit, God, monarchy, aristocracy and the class system.

But Materialism does not necessarily lead to socialist utopia. History showed a different outcome, when the Marxist government of the Soviet Union collapsed and many people accepted benevolent free market capitalism (known as neo-liberalism) as the only workable economic system.⁵¹

Nor is Materialism the only road to socialism: Marx developed his Materialist ideas at the same time as others who proposed socialism from a different perspective. For example, the utopian socialist communities proposed by St Simone were based on idealist principles.

Despite the collapse of Marxism, Materialism remains the basis for socialist thinking, though its vision is now blurred. British philosopher Mark Fisher

⁵⁰ Kenny, Anthony, *A New History of Western Philosophy* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 2010) 551. Baruch Spinoza's rationalist metaphysics, described in his *Ethics* (1677), are an important strand of Enlightenment thought. Spinoza responded to Cartesian dualism with an ontological "monism" according to which there is only one substance, God or nature, with two modes corresponding to mind and body. Spinoza denied the existence of a transcendent supreme being. He identified God with nature, giving impetus to strands of atheism or pantheism in Enlightenment philosophy.

⁵¹ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, (Winchester, UK, O Books, 2014)

invented the term 'Capitalist Realism' to refer to a position that sees no viable alternative to capitalism. It's a depressing place without a positive vision of a future – all the more depressing because the solution (to end growth in material demand) is so apparently obvious and easy to achieve.

Fisher describes 'reality' as a conceptual mirage obscuring the Real (Material) truth: "The Real is what any 'reality' must suppress ... the Real is an unrepresentable X, that can be glimpsed in the fractures and voids of apparent reality." The real includes global poverty and environmental collapse.⁵²

3.3 Materiality and Materialism: a post modern, post political perspective

A lecture by Mark Wright at Brighton University in 2017 introduced me to the term Materiality. It offered a perspective that seemed to combine aspects of Materialism with transcendent qualities of idealism.

Mark praised the Material properties of paint. He also referred to the Materiality of images displayed on computer screens. Previously, computer-based images have been thought of as concept-like, non-material virtual entities.⁵³ Mark suggested that the Materiality of the computer screens, such as reflected light, the size and portability of the device, was inseparable from the projected image.

Intriguingly, Mark suggested that Materiality in painting was connected to the artist in a way that might be interpreted through phenomenology of French philosopher Merleau-Ponty, who sought to explain our perception of the world - by visualising consciousness as situated in the body, connected to the world. Merleau-Ponty is an existentialist who takes a Materialist perspective: he says "man makes the world to be for himself, but ... the world is a solid tissue, already there before I make any observations about it or analyze it. But it is only man's presence that makes the world possible as world: it is the existential subject, or the conscious being who alone can be aware of and give meaning to the world."⁵⁴

In Materiality, instead of the artist's logical Conceptual will, qualities of Materials form the Art process. This might be a result of physical laws that control the flow of paint, but it allows intuition to guide the intervention of the artist. Some texts hint at a kind of agency (the power to act) in the Material.⁵⁵

⁵² Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, (Winchester, UK, O Books, 2014) 18.

⁵³ The materiality of consumer goods and computer data was questioned at Jean-Francois Lyotard and Thierry Chaput's influential show 'Les Immatériaux' at the Centre Pompidu in Paris 1985.

⁵³ Petra Lange-Berndt, *Materiality*, (London/Cambridge USA, Whitechapel Gallery/MIT Press, 2015) 16.

⁵⁴ Barral, Mary Rose. "Merleau-Ponty on the Body" *Southern Journal of Philosophy*. 7(2), (1969) 171-79.

⁵⁵ Karen Barad, "Meeting the Universe Halfway", *Materiality*, (London/Cambridge USA, Whitechapel Gallery/MIT Press, 2015) 213.

3.4 Materiality and Marxism

Materiality defines Marxist 'materialism'. Anthropologist Daniel Miller says: 'The first major secular theory of humanity that seemed capable of dominating the world, Marxism, rested upon a philosophy of praxis, whose foundation also lies in its stance to materiality. Humanity is viewed as the product of its capacity to transform the material world in production, in the mirror of which we create ourselves. Capitalism is condemned above all for interrupting this virtuous cycle by which we create the objects that in turn create our understanding of who we can be. Instead, commodities are fetishised and come to oppress those who made them'.⁵⁶

Materiality as described by Daniel Miller has no totalising conclusions; it is not Marxism. It is a perspective that must be separately applied to each individual situation.

Similarly, in art practice, the perspective of Materiality shares the same roots as Materialism, and the ghost of Marxism is present. Petra Bernt-Lang, in her book *Materiality*, devotes a chapter to 'The Living Fire of Human Labour', and identifies Marxism in the art practice of Carl Andre, whose work is more often referred to through Formalist analysis as 'Minimalist'.⁵⁷

Marxism is merely an aspect of Bernt-Lang's Materiality, which also devotes chapters to Materials, Bodies, Nature, Media, and 'Rematerialisation of the Void'. There are no totalising solutions. However, as Marx did, Materiality looks at being human from outside the framework of logical Conceptuality.

3.5 Pure Concept is impossible - Art needs a Material aspect

Despite Duchamp's revolutionary idea that art is a Concept shared between artist and audience, Art cannot be pure Concept. Art cannot exist without some aspect of the Material – at least not if you view the world from a Materialist perspective, as I explain below.

Art is always an artefact of human action, a *result* of consciousness acting in the Material world. It cannot be concept, idea, or pure consciousness itself. Ideas need to be communicated in a physical, material medium.

For example, an improvised song needs at least a human voice, which needs a body. And the sound itself is vibration in air, which is 'acoustic material' according to Julia Kristeva.⁵⁸

In the example of Weiner's conceptual *Statements* cited above, the artwork only exists by virtue of the paper and ink it is composed of. The truncated prose and

⁵⁶ Daniel Miller, "Materiality: An Introduction", *Materiality*, (London, Duke University Press 2005)

⁵⁷ Petra Lange-Berndt, *Materiality*, (London/Cambridge USA, Whitechapel Gallery/MIT Press, 2015) 68-69.

⁵⁸ Petra Lange-Berndt, "Introduction", *Materiality*, (London/Cambridge USA, Whitechapel Gallery/MIT Press, 2015) 29.

minimalist typography constitute a novel form, but they are material form none-the-less.

More: even if Weiner's statements could somehow be offered to an audience as pure abstract concept, they would still require matter to exist: brains to think, or to perceive or comprehend them.

This begs the question: in Conceptual art, where does the Concept exist - in the mind of the artist, or in the artwork? The idealist says Concepts exist independently of Matter. Is this transferred into an artwork, and to an audience?

The materialist says Concepts only exist as part of Matter - such as a brain. Artwork contains impressions of Concept, imprinted into Matter, which can then evoke similar Concepts in an audience.

Similarly, the so-called 'virtual' world of computer data is mentioned above: digital images require computer software and hardware to exist. The audience experience of digital images is shaped by the materiality of the device used to view them - its size, reflectivity and resolution. On screen or as a projection, the material aspects of virtual art define the audience experience.

Crypto currencies - the 'virtual' cash generated by computers - exemplify an apparently dematerialised reality. However, the immense computing power required to generate crypto-currencies is one aspect of the currency's Materiality. A more fundamental aspect of the Materiality of money is that it only has value because of our shared belief in its power to command Material wealth. Without such belief, it is merely a symbol residing in the materiality of a computer.

Miller discusses this illusion of the immateriality of financial instruments: "Humanity constantly returns to vast projects devoted to immateriality, whether as religion, as philosophy, or for Miyazaki, theory as the practice of finance. But all of these rest upon the same paradox - that immateriality can only be expressed through materiality." Miller goes on to draw a parallel with the value of contemporary art.⁵⁹

Besides needing a Material medium to exist in, Art as we have defined it, also needs a specific, Material identity (so it can be proposed by the artist, shared with an audience, and incorporated into cultural institutions). Take our example of an improvised song, above. No matter how beautiful it is, it cannot fulfil our definition if it cannot be identified as a piece of Art - labelled, shown, discussed. It needs to be identified through written notation, or electronic recording, or at least, through memorialisation of *that* happening which occurred in a specific place in (material) time and space.

⁵⁹ 59 Daniel Miller, "Materiality: An Introduction (Immateriality)", *Materiality*, (London, Duke University Press 2005). <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/people/academic-teaching-staff/daniel-miller/mil-8>

Idealist, dualist philosophers such as Descartes believe pure Concept exists independently of a Material world. But Materialist philosophy says pure Concepts cannot exist independently of matter, they can only occur in a material matrix such as the brain or the body – and as material traces or imprints in art, books and computers.⁶⁰

To restate, and draw out an apparent contradiction: For a Materialist, Concept only exists as an aspect of Matter, as sound exists as an aspect of air. This seems to contradict the apparent oppositional relationship of Materiality and Conceptuality where the processes seem to be different, independent (although combined in art or praxis).

The opposition is only an illusion of an Idealist, dualist viewpoint. Materiality and Conceptuality are processes or mental constructions of human consciousness, where they appear to be in opposition, giving rise to Idealist dualism. But from a Materialist perspective, Materiality and Conceptuality are different aspects of the same thing, since consciousness exists only as an aspect or vibration of Matter/Energy.

3.6 The ineffable other of Materiality

Materiality shares the same ontological (nature of being) perspective as Materialism – that Matter determines the human experience (as opposed to Idealists' Concept or Idea defining the perceived Material cosmos).

But Materiality does not claim the logical certainty of Materialism.

Bernt-Lang acknowledges the common root of Materiality and Materialism. She distinguishes the two by allowing the notions of the agency of matter and the post-structural fuzziness of Derrida's deconstruction of language to enter her description of Materiality.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Can 'concept' exist independently of 'matter'? Here, I assert art cannot be purely conceptual; it needs a material element to exist. We might ask: can pure concept exist at all, independent of a matter? This is a root question of philosophy, concerning the nature of being (ontology): given that we are aware of our consciousness (the subject), and an outside reality (the object): then what is human consciousness and perceived reality? This gives rise to two opposing philosophies of being. Firstly, the idealist and dualist schools of Plato and Descartes describe two distinct parts of existence: idea (consciousness) and perceived reality (matter). Secondly, the materialist and monist schools of Parmenides and Spinoza say the cosmos is made only of one substance (matter/energy or objective reality).

The first idea (dualism/idealism) allows for belief in non-material (non-empirical) ideas such as God, immortal human spirit and animism (spirit in non-human things). The second idea (monism/materialism) says no immaterial things exist independently of matter. Since consciousness is apparent, materialists envisage this as a 'state' of matter. We might visualise this as nodes within a matrix, or altered states of matter/energy.

⁶¹ Petra Lange-Berndt, "Introduction", *Materiality*, (London/Cambridge USA, Whitechapel Gallery/MIT Press, 2015).

Here, we encounter the shift from the modernist school of Materialism, to the postmodern school of Materiality.

In Materialism, consciousness (and Conceptuality and any notions of spirit), are described as aspects of Matter, which will eventually be completely understood by empirical science within a framework of Logic.

Materiality likewise describes consciousness as an aspect of Matter – but Materiality makes no claim to being able to describe consciousness in word-logical terms. This is because words are only labels for ideas and cannot adequately describe infinite Matter.

When we use words, we confront the limitations of words and concepts to describe perceived 'objective reality', which is infinite and extends beyond our conceptual, empirical knowledge. Materiality avoids the limitations of word-based logic when trying to define the other (not I) that lies beyond our consciousness.

We might be tempted to use word-logic to describe this indefinable (ineffable) other, immanent to cosmic Matter, as god, or some other agency of matter. But if we do use logic in this way, we re-introduce a transcendent dimension, and return to idealist dualism, where all we are certain of is consciousness itself.

Materiality asks that we not limit our understanding of being to what can be described by word-concepts. And it warns us of the consequences of defining ourselves purely as immaterial beings who conform to abstract ideals such as capitalism and Marxism.

Materiality is an attempt to avoid word-logic, and an appeal to another form of dialogue. The ineffable other of Materiality is best described and understood by conscious action in the Material world (praxis).

3.7 Art's purpose and value to society

Art and society have a circular relationship. Art is a product of humanity, and art influences how humanity sees itself, and so how it behaves. Art is integral to, interwoven with humanity. But art is not every thing we do - it's those aspects of our culture we choose to value and venerate.

Art's value is both to the human individual, and to society. These two aspects may be called the intimate and public aspects of art.

- To the individual, art is a meditation that contributes to understanding of ones self, and fully developing our human consciousness.
- In the outer world of society, the world and the universe: it is a reflection of our shared values of humanity and action in the world. It is our mirror.

The implications for society are significant. If Mark Fisher is right, our society is going mad because of the contradictions of 'capitalist realism'.⁶² We need reasons to live - other than ceaseless capital growth. Automation and artificial intelligence threatens to make humans redundant. The possibility of an alternative social framework that sees creative and spiritual practice as valid occupations is tempting.

4. Conclusion

This essay suggests art practice is a philosophical reflection on the nature of being. Processes of art practice - Materiality and Conceptuality – are a reflection of human consciousness. Art is 'silent' in the world of words and logic, but is important in the realm of the non-logical – the realm of intuition and the infinite.

Art also holds out a hope for the future of mankind - postmodern, post-growth. Now we have conquered nature, we need an alternative value system and praxis based on the Real rather than realism - the conceptual mirage of (capitalist) logic.

In practical terms: art practice provides a philosophy of life that can replace the philosophy of domination, competition and accumulation of wealth. Art and spirituality could be practices that inspire and envision a future utopia.

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⁶² Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, (Winchester, UK, O Books, 2014) 31-38

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7.2 Appendixes

7.2.1 Key terms as used in this essay

Idea is a phenomenon (epiphenomenon) of consciousness (a Thought), taking the form of mental images. In some texts 'ideas' are synonymous with 'concepts', but in this essay they are distinguished, since we need to specifically refer to the logic of word-concepts, as opposed to image-ideas.

Ideality is a process defined by Ideas. Ideality is the term usually used in opposition to Materiality⁶³ (idealism vs. materialism is the classic opposition in philosophy). But, as discussed above, Ideas are an imprecise notion - if we wish to refer to a process of word-logic, the term Conceptuality is more precise. The implications of this refinement are interesting, - if we exclude ideas and intuition from word-logic (Conceptuality), where do they exist? see 7.2.2

Intuition is a process of consciousness that uses non-word based ideas such as feelings and empathy to form a picture of the world.

Concept is a phenomenon of consciousness (a thought) taking the form of words. A concept might be thought of as a feeling, idea or thought, which has been labelled with a word. Concepts are the elements of logic and all the conceptual structures of logical philosophy – metaphysics, rationalism and empiricism.

Conceptuality may be a term I've coined. It is a process defined by word-concepts (logic), as distinct from Ideality and Materiality. This may be the equivalent of Lacan's "Symbolic".⁶⁴

Logic is a dialogue based on words to form a rational picture of the world. It is opposed to intuition.

⁶³ Karl Simms, *The Materiality and Ideality of Text: Said and Ricoeur* (Taylor Francis)

⁶⁴ The Symbolic (or Symbolic Order) is a part of the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, part of his attempt "to distinguish between those elementary registers ... the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real — a distinction never previously made in psychoanalysis". "Man speaks, then, but it is because the symbol has made him man ... superimposes the kingdom of culture on that of a nature" ... "language is the basic social institution in the sense that all others presuppose language."
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Symbolic

Matter is the 'objective reality' of being. Idealist/dualist philosophers propose that human consciousness (identified by ideas) is separate from matter. Materialist philosophers propose that ideas can only exist within a material matrix, which comes before ideas.

Materiality is the aspect of a process defined by materials.

7.2.2 A note on Conceptuality and Materiality as aspects of consciousness

There are interesting consequences to the refinement that differentiates Ideas from Concepts. Since we are concerned with the world of word-logic, and its opposition, we might oppose Conceptuality to Materiality. This leaves a grey area for non-conceptual (non-word) Ideas – thought-images, feelings, and intuition. These non-conceptual thoughts might then be categorised as part of realm of Materiality. The opposition is no longer between Matter and Mind, but between Logic and Non-Logic. Non-Logic (here called Materiality) is where we can put all the mysterious, things that cannot be described by Logic (Conceptuality). Those who argue Logic (and Science) is capable of knowing everything, might ask themselves where the unknown exists at the present moment (where was the nuclear bomb before Einstein)? That unknown exists is undeniable. This in itself is proof of the limits of Logic. If we cannot know everything through Logic, can we know it through another mechanism – intuition, belief or expanded consciousness? This does not necessarily lead to dualism and the idea of a transcendent dimension, since materialists conceive of consciousness as a 'state' of matter/energy. But it does force us to acknowledge the limits of word-logic and empirical science, and to examine what lies beyond, since there will always be a beyond.

Then, from the perspective of the conscious self (an idealist perspective), the real opposition is in the parts of human consciousness. The opposition is between word-logic (Conceptuality) and the non-logical part of consciousness - Ideality – that contains intuition, empathy - and the phenomenon of the perceived material world, Materiality.

From a perspective of Materiality, Matter (matter/energy the stuff of the cosmos) is all that exists. Consciousness exists as an aspect of Matter/Energy - a vibration in the matrix of Matter. Thoughts, including the opposition of Conceptuality and Ideality (including ideas of Materiality) exist as more subtle vibrations within consciousness.

Why is the proper understanding of the relationship between Conceptuality and Materiality important? Because if we can properly see Concept and logic as parts of a bigger picture – as limited processes contained within an infinite cosmos of matter/energy – we might realise our that focus on the conceptual goals of empiricism and rationalism (including capitalism) are limited and immaterial.

Then we might spend time in non-logical, reflective processes such as art practice and meditation. In this way may slow the juggernaut of rationalisation that calls for maximised growth and material exploitation, threatening human existence and environmental disaster.