

BA Fine Art: Studio, Site and Context

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Materials, time and disruption:

Intervening in the fabric of the present

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Materials, time and disruption: Intervening in the fabric of the present

Introduction

I am interested in how art can articulate a critical response to the present. More specifically, I am intrigued by how art can articulate such a response in a way that is different from a written critique. A written text employs words, concepts, structure, reasoning and evidence to develop and set out an argument. An artist might be engaged with the same concerns as an author, but the communication of ideas through art operates in a different way. Developing an art practice requires learning to think as an artist. Like the annoying impulse of a shopping trolley which veers in an unwanted direction, my mind instinctively starts to formulate ideas in words. On this degree programme I have found that pursuing a materials-led process of enquiry is one way of breaking that instinct.

In exploring how art can articulate a critical response to the present, this research proposal therefore starts with materials. It then considers time, and the relationship between the present and the past. Finally, the proposal examines the notion of disruption. Exploration of these keywords enables me to formulate the question: 'how can artists intervene in the material of everyday life in a way that disrupts our habitual understandings of the present?'

Materials

My starting point is the question of materials, stuff, the fabric of the present. In *Stuff Matters* (2014) Mark Miodownik explores the material basis of everyday life, weaving back and forth between ordinary experiences and the materials involved. Where most people would see discrete things, he sees continuities of material: the steel in a razor blade, a ball-point pen tip, a staple attaching a bureaucratic form, his father's key ring, the outside of the family car, the spoon with which he silently eats his soup (2014, 1-3). Materials, he says, are 'the ingredients that built our world'; the biggest 'library of materials' which exists is 'the man-made world itself' (p. 4). As a materials scientist, what fascinates Miodownik is 'a pure form of materiality' (p. 184). Meanwhile, since the early twentieth century one of the key moves away from the established hierarchies of western art was the incorporation of fragments of everyday material into art work. Movements ranging from Surrealism and Fluxus to Minimalism and Arte Povera have worked directly with ordinary everyday materials (Foster et al., 2007).

My own interest in working with existing materials, stuff that is to hand, derived initially from the pragmatics of COVID lockdown, as well as concerns about ecology and cost (the inherent elitism of art practices using expensive materials). I learned that working with found materials immediately raises questions about the politics and history of the present. For example I have been working with reclaimed wooden floorboards, cast-offs from my neighbours' renovation project. The text MUSKOKA RED DEER BRAND MADE IN CANADA reveals their origin (fig. 1).

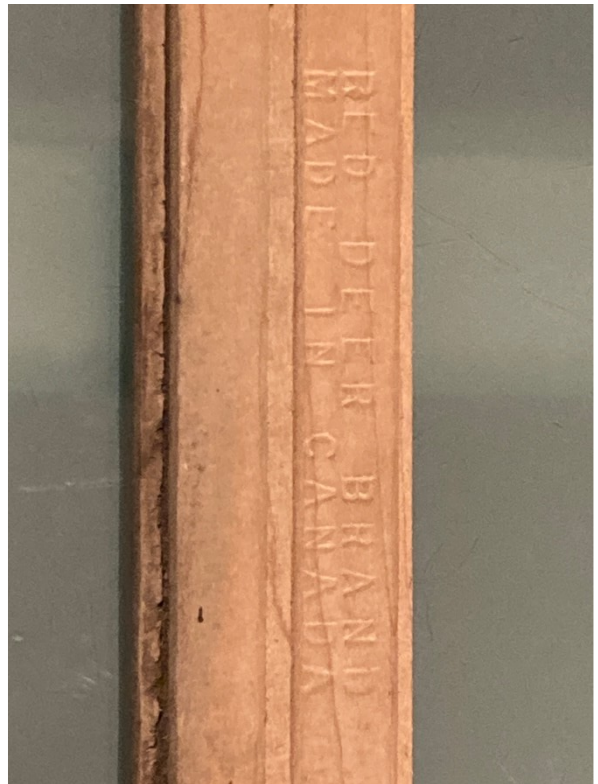


Fig. 1 Found reclaimed floorboards, 'MUSKOKA RED DEER BRAND'.

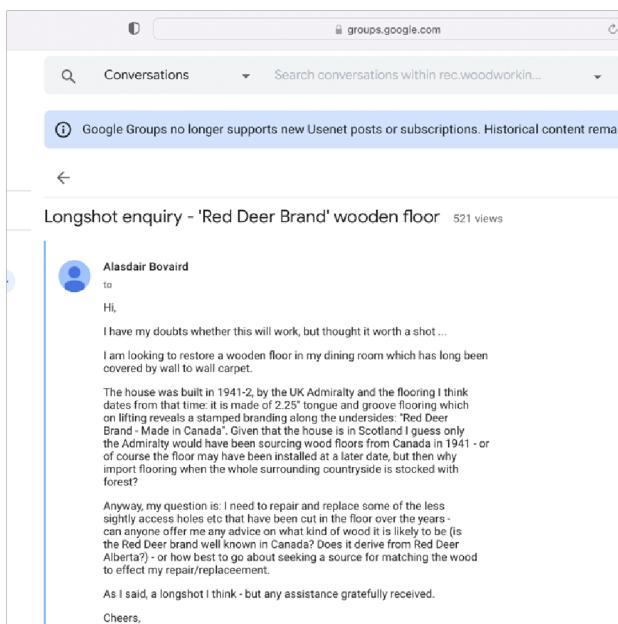
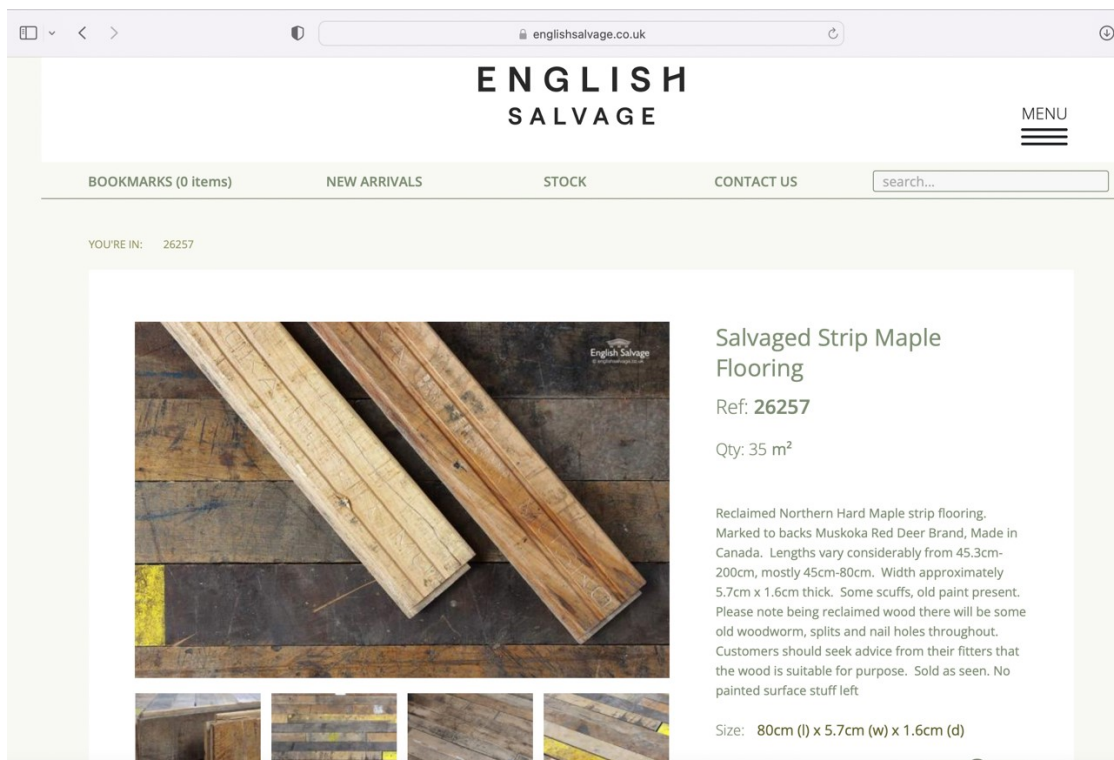


Fig. 2 Screenshot images from internet research into 'MUSKOKA RED DEER BRAND'.

Internet research indicated that these hardwood floorboards, probably maple or birch, might have first been used in the UK for the floor of a factory, a sports hall, or a wealthy home (fig. 2), which decades later was dismantled, the floorboards recovered by a salvage company, and then purchased by a young middle-class couple doing up their first home. These floorboards are thus imbued with histories of colonial extraction, international trade, sites of industry, public leisure or private wealth, and cycles of societal, economic and personal change.

Petra Lange-Berndt makes a strong case for the importance of materiality in contemporary art. She argues that much art practice, especially modernism, has 'remained within the realm of the white cube', side-stepping the question of materials, their societal characteristics and 'above all their histories' (Lange-Berndt, 2011, 13). She advocates that a focus on materials 'means not to discuss aesthetic issues of quality, expressiveness or symbolic content but to investigate transpersonal societal problems and matters of concern' (2011, 16). This echoes Tony Godfrey's discussion of minimalism and materials. In 1960s New York the minimalists Sol LeWitt, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd and Carl Andre, and those theorising their work such as Mel Bochner, were strongly opposed to the work and views of artists and theorists such as Anthony Caro and Clement Greenberg (Godfrey, 1998, 108-114; Hopkins, 2000, 143-145). Caro's work and its approval by Greenberg or William Reuben, curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, was seen as synonymous 'with the 'human essence', 'civilization', 'quality', 'genius' all terms associated with a conservative and mystificatory ideology' (Godfrey, 1998, 112). Godfrey elaborates that central to minimalism's rejection of traditional assumptions about art was its radical emphasis on

'the object rather than the signifier ... you were seeing a thing not an 'expression' or 'symbol'" (1998, 114-5).

What are the effects for the viewer of 'seeing a thing', art made from materials or objects which are part of the everyday world? In their reflection on 'thingness', Karen Richmond and Maiko Tsutsumi (2011, 1) observe that 'as humans we experience our world through the materiality of things'. They argue that material things 'mediate the internal and external world of human beings', and that engaging with the world of materiality enables the artist to 'produce the familiar, bringing the world closer to us'. Andre, Flavin and Judd made works out of existing objects and materials – firebricks, fluorescent tubes, industrial steel – and they placed these on the floor, on walls or outside, 'abolishing the plinth' (Moszynska, 2013, 10; fig. 3). Andre's floor works were meant to be walked on by viewers (Hopkins, 2000, 144; fig. 4). These works were 'no longer isolated, physically or literally, from the everyday world'; attention is shifted 'from the work's internal grammar and towards its external context' (Moszynska, 2013, 10).

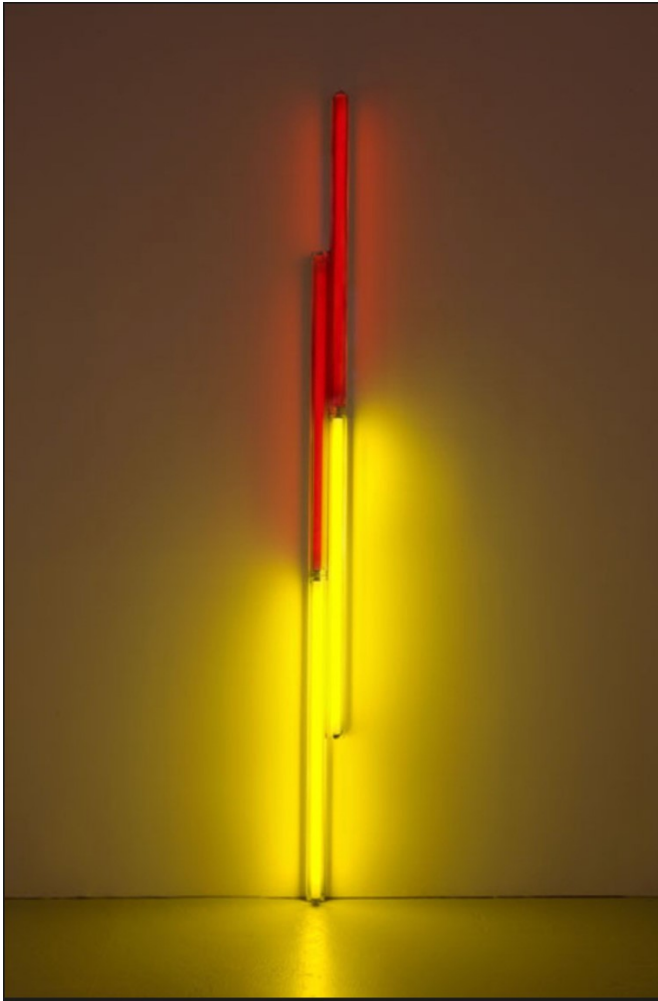


Fig. 3 Dan Flavin *Untitled* (1968)



Fig. 4 Carl Andre *Magnesium Square* (1969)

Time

Everyday materials exist in specific contexts and endure through time, and so contain the past within them. In scientific terms, Miodownik explains how the method of carbon dating measures the rate of radioactive decay to establish a material's age, and how the alignment of hexagonal planes of carbon atoms to form coal results from 'geological processes acting on dead plant matter over millions of years' (2014, 182, 190). But when the Marxist philosopher Theodor Adorno (1967, 12) said that materials 'are by no means merely given by nature, as an unreflective artist might easily presume. History has accumulated in them', he was not referring to atomic alignment or radioactive decay. What does it mean to think about history accumulated within materials of the present? Two thinkers, Walter Benjamin and Mark Fisher, offer important insights.

Benjamin, another Marxist philosopher and friend of Adorno, addressed questions of time, history and the relationship between past and present through material objects (Cadava, 1997). In his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' written in 1940 Benjamin distinguishes his critical understanding from the dominant approach of historicism. Benjamin attacks the idea of progress which resides at the heart of historicist thinking. This entails a view of history as linear and directional, moving forward into the future, with continued advances in technology and knowledge. Progress, he said, was seen as boundless and irresistible (Benjamin, 1969, 260-261). Such an approach tells the history of the victors which masquerades as 'universal history': 'its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogenous, empty time' (p. 262).

Benjamin outlines a radically different notion of history.



Fig 5. Paul Klee, *Angelus Novos* (1920).

Referring to a print by Paul Klee (fig. 5), he describes the figure of the 'angel of history' who looks back at what has already happened, rather than forward into the future:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. (Benjamin, 1969, 258).

The angel looks at the past in the face of a storm:

A storm is blowing from Paradise ... This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin, 1969, 258).

Elsewhere he wrote: 'The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are 'status quo' is the catastrophe.' (1999, 473).

Benjamin conceived the relationship between the past and the present not as a sequence of events but as a constellation, and his mode of enquiry focused on images and material objects. His immense *Arcades* project explored objects and practices such as Boredom, Prostitution, Gambling, Modes of Lighting, The Stock Exchange, Idleness (Benjamin 1999). He sought to expose the historical 'terrain' of the nineteenth century 'to the light of the present' through a method which he likened to montage, with a 'heightened graphicness', 'wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation', achieving a 'telescoping of the past through the present' which 'blasts the epoch out of the reified "continuity of history"' but also 'explodes the homogeneity of the epoch, interspersing it with ruins – that is, with the present' (Benjamin, 1999, 458-474).

Mark Fisher is a more recent thinker who also addressed the materiality of the past in the present. Fisher (2012) was concerned with a sense of lost futures and how the

present is haunted by what might have been. Perceiving a bleakness in the cultural impasse of the present which is incapable of analysing its own time and can only provide ahistorical and uncritical narrations of the past, Fisher (2014) examines works of film, television, music or literature which instead exhibit what he calls a hauntological sensibility. Several of these derive from a period in the 1960s and 1970s when public funding enabled experimental works, a configuration subsequently eclipsed by the commercial pressures of neoliberalism. Fisher (2014) uses terms like dyschronia, broken time, and anachronistic temporality to grasp this sensibility, a sense of unease, of time being 'out-of-joint'. He contrasts this with the blandness of the cultural mainstream which lacks a sense of time, portraying ahistorical 'non-time' just like the 'non-places' diagnosed by Marc Augé (Fisher, 2014, 5; Augé, 1995). For example, he emphasises the 'fractured and abrasive' feeling of David Peace's novels which offer 'an escape from the kind of good humoured, well balanced, middle of the road, middlebrow realism' that most television drama provides (2014, 85-86). The works he appreciates convey a sense of texture, grain and 'lived-in' time alongside the painful feeling of broken time (2014, 76-77). A lot of the music that Fisher discusses samples fragments of sound from the past to create a sense of sonic disruption, an anachronizing where 'the origin is out of joint' (2014, 130).

Disruption

Summing up so far: an artwork incorporating everyday materials might shift the viewer's attention from the interior aesthetic of the work to its external context, to societal problems and histories. The dominant ideologies of the twentieth century articulated universal history as a sequence of events leading inevitably towards progress, while today the cultural mainstream incessantly and uncritically celebrates the past (for example *The Crown*, *Downton Abbey*). These reflections on materials and

time suggest that 'seeing a thing' or hearing a sample might provide an experience which questions or jars with the present, in contrast to works which serve to confirm conservative and mystificatory ideologies. Richmond and Tsutsumi suggested that in bringing the world closer to us, things of the present might 'produce the familiar', but insights from Benjamin and Fisher entail that the familiar materiality of the present is charged with more difficult relations with the past. Benjamin's critical philosophy of history gives us terms like flash and blast; Fisher uses a vocabulary of unease resulting from dyschronic temporalities. It seems we need some concept of disruption to articulate the potential of materials in art to engage critically with the relationship between the past and the present.

Simon O'Sullivan (2007) develops precisely such a position. He conceives of art which offers an 'object of encounter' as having the potential to disrupt conventional habits and understandings, contrasting this with an 'object of recognition' which represents the familiar and, in doing so, reassures and confirms our existing understanding and experience. With re-presentation 'we, and the world we inhabit, are reconfirmed as that which we already understood our world and ourselves to be' (p. 1); whereas through an encounter, 'art can produce a break with habitual formations and dominant signifying regimes' (p. 69). How does this happen?

O'Sullivan draws on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and their engagement with the thought of Henri Bergson and Baruch Spinoza, to develop his position. Deleuze and Guattari elaborated an entirely novel philosophical system about what the world consists of and how it can be known, which emphasises flows, relations and processes rather than static, fixed entities and essences (Deleuze and Guattari,

2013; Massumi, 1992). O'Sullivan (2007, 9-37) examines how their ideas entail a notion of thought which is non-representational and offers a route beyond the impasse of deconstruction. Theories of deconstruction, he claims, endlessly critique the binaries of existing bodies of work (speech/writing; content/form, and so on) but ultimately remain constrained by these same binaries (O'Sullivan, 2007, 14-17).

Leaving behind the terrain of signification and deconstruction, O'Sullivan (2007, 3868) emphasises a relational and materialist idea of knowledge which can be summed up as 'affect'. This focuses not on representation, but on feeling and experience. In brief, this would lead to the question what does an art work *do*, rather than, what does it *mean*? (p. 22). O'Sullivan summarises Bergson's ideas about affect by saying that there is a gap between 'excitation and reaction' (p. 46), between '*stimulus and response*' (p. 38, emphasis added). It is in this gap that the predictability of habit can be broken, enabling instead a creative response to the world (pp. 38-47):

Following Bergson we might say that we are caught, as beings in the world, on a certain spatio-temporal register: we 'see' only what we have already seen. We see only that which we are *interested* in. At stake with art might be an altering – a switching – of this register. (O'Sullivan, 2007, 47; original emphasis).

O'Sullivan's argument is inspiring, if difficult. However, much of it seems to be about art in general – that it is art as such which has this potential to disrupt conventional habits of thought. Is there anything specific about work which engages with everyday materials? O'Sullivan (2007, 4) advocates for a 'return to matter', but this seems as much about his conception of knowledge as about a return to matter in art. He does

however provide some helpful insights when exploring how art can effect a disruption of habitual attitudes. Affect is what connects us to the world around us; it is the material of our bodies responding to the material of the world. By reorganising familiar material, art can give access to 'our world experienced differently' (p. 50). This happens especially with 'the use of specifically non-artistic materials', when the work thereby 'opens itself up to an outside' (p. 73, 74). This, he says, 'is often what makes a successful work of art: it utilises the stuff of the world to go beyond that world' (p. 67).

Conclusion and research question

This enquiry started materials, addressed their temporality and considered how this might be disrupted. The opening concern with how art can articulate a critical response to the present can now be formulated as: *how can artists intervene in the material of everyday life in a way that disrupts our habitual understandings of the present?*

Having been formulated through engagement with the works of various philosophers and theorists, this question now demands attention to actual art works and the practice of specific artists. In the dissertation I hope to explore the work of Gordon Matta-Clark, Mona Hatoum and Doris Salcedo (figs 6-8).



Fig 6. Gordon Matta-Clark *Bronx Floors* (1972-73).

These artists all work with materials of everyday life, whether the fabric of urban space or domestic objects. Their practices all entail some form of intervention, disruption, or disfiguration in or of ordinary materials and objects (Walker, 2009; Adan, 2010; Alloujami 2022). They intervene in everyday materials and objects in a manner which elicits a disorienting experience for the viewer, and the disorientation arises from the discontinuity of the familiar or the expected.



Fig 7. Mona Hatoum *Incommunicado* (1993)

One of the reasons why I find their work compelling to research is how this effect operates as a way of addressing politics. Their work, by causing a felt reaction of unease, provokes a questioning of broader social relations, histories and political structures, but in a way which does not spell out a position for the viewer.



Fig 8. Doris Salcedo *Untitled* (2003)

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