

Contemporary Dialogues – Coexistent Perspectives (ADAA7000)

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Word Count: 4377

Date: 8/01/2024

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In the context of Tacit knowledge as defined by Michael Polanyi, how do makers utilise touch and materials to heighten the understanding and appreciation of artwork?

Introduction

“Art can engage people, far better than science can. Science is fascinating, but art can touch something inside us which is hard to describe” (Studio Olafur Eliasson, 2014).

This essay will investigate tacit knowledge in relation to materials and how artists like Antony Gormley and Olafur Eliasson use tacit knowledge alongside materials in their artistic/making practice to discuss and explore conceptual and contemporary subjects.

Michael Polanyi states “We always know more than we can tell” (Polanyi, 1966). This is in relation to knowledge that we have that is ‘tacit’, knowledge that cannot be fully articulated. Polanyi states tacit knowledge is “indeterminate in the sense that its content cannot be explicitly stated” (Polanyi, 1969). Knowledge can be explicit, implicit, or tacit. Explicit knowledge can be articulated and easily shared while implicit knowledge is the application of explicit knowledge. For example, a recipe for cookies would be considered explicit knowledge as the information clearly and effectively communicates steps to follow. The act of following the recipe would be an example of implicit knowledge as you are using the recipe to inform the steps you take for making the cookies. But where does tacit knowledge fit in? You gain tacit

knowledge from the hands-on experience of doing the task. Therefore, following the recipe analogy, you gain an understanding of what the dough feels like. This informs your personal understanding of the consistency of the dough which advises you if the texture of the dough is ready or if more ingredients are needed. This information is something difficult to articulate in a recipe and is only discovered through exploration and experience. In an artistic environment tacit knowledge can influence how artists and makers perceive, conceptualise, and express ideas. Artists and makers acquire skills through hands-on experience with their materials. It is only through experimentation and use can an artist truly understand the depth and capabilities of the materials that they use, this embodied tacit knowledge, or tacit knowing, allows them to manipulate materials with precision to further emphasise the concepts that they are attempting to convey to their audiences. It is important to note that audiences also use and gain tacit knowledge when viewing and contemplating art and design concepts.

An emphasis on communication in art arose in the 1960s and 70s with conceptual art. Conceptual art had greater meaning placed on the subject matter or idea behind the work as compared to the materials used and aesthetic appeal. The concept was deemed “more important than the finished art object” (Tate, n.d.) and rejected the traditional forms of making art that represented formalism and the importance it placed on craftsmanship and skill. However, art continued to evolve into the concept of materiality which recognises that materials and as well as artistic expression impact on overall meaning and depth that a piece of work has.

It is not only a question of how the substance of the art's message intersects with the society and give rise to new ideas but the revolution that comes through the medium itself (Cossio, 2022).

As there is now considered no dominant approach to creating contemporary art similar ideas of blurring the boundaries began to arise in design where the pushing of form and function began to raise questions and materials became more explorative. That is why I have chosen both Antony Gormley and Olafur Eliasson to discuss in further depth as their work considers both art and craft in meaning and process and both are very considerate of the materials used. This essay will explore the intricate ways makers like Gormley and Eliasson utilise their work as a form of communication between maker and audience.

Chapter 1 -Tacit Knowledge

Tacit knowledge refers to information that cannot be explicitly written or communicated verbally. The knowledge is ingrained in individuals and is gained through experience, continuous interaction, and practice which informs our intuition. Michael Polanyi, a chemical engineer turned scientist, first used the term 'tacit knowledge' in his book *The Tacit Dimension* in 1966 (Polanyi, M. 1966). Tacit knowledge can be found in a professional setting as well as in an individual's personal life. Tacit is abstract and has an input on how we interact and perceive the world. For example, learning how to speak another language is tacit as language learning encompasses the ability to intuitively use the language in multiple contexts, someone learning a language does not have the same understanding of rhythm, intonation, and stress pat-

terns as a native speaker. To gain these aspects of speaking another language it requires immersive exposure and practise. We must understand the basic foundation of information, which is acquired through exploration and practice. Similar inputs can be seen with material knowledge. It is the knowledge that is 'tacit' that influences our decisions related to materials selection, quality, and use. However, when exploring materials, it is necessary to explore the haptic information, which is information gained through touch, as it is one of the sensory components that inform tacit knowledge.

Haptic information, or information attained through touch by the hands, is important for the evaluation of products that vary in terms of material properties related to texture, hardness, temperature, and weight (Peck & Childers, 2003).

One of the fundamental concepts of tacit knowledge outlined in *The Tacit Dimension* is awareness. Polanyi gives an insight into two types of 'awareness' - Focal and Subsidiary. Focal awareness refers to a state of consciousness where an individual is actively engaged in a specific aspect or their own internal or external experiences. Specifically directing the attention to a singular specific stimulus. To contrast, Subsidiary awareness refers to the awareness of background information, elements in our environment without giving them any specific engagement or acknowledgement. Both focal and subsidiary awareness are mutually exclusive. An individual cannot be focally and subsidiarily aware at the same time, but information in the subsidiary can become focal and focal can become subsidiary, depending on the context. While walking through the park focally, one might focus on the pathway being walked

on while subsidiary refers to the background stimuli like the sound of the trees in the wind, the presence of people or the feel of the sun. An individual can switch one's focus to the trees in which the trees become the stimuli of focal awareness and the pathway become the subsidiary. Polanyi states the differences and relation as:

When we are relying on our awareness of something (A) for attending to something else (B), we are but subsidiarily aware of A. The thing B to which we are thus focally attending is then the meaning of A (Polanyi, 1964).

Explicit knowledge is easily articulated and expressed. We gain this knowledge by reading books, following recipes, watching seminars, and research-based work. Schools rely heavily on explicit knowledge as students gather large amounts of information through focal attention. However, Tacit knowledge does not require the transfer of data from one mind to another or through deductive secondary information but instead arises from “the active engagement of the body with the factors comprising our subsidiary awareness” (Sorri, 1994). For example, when working with clay, focally you are aware and focused on creating a form, but the subsidiary information – The tactility of the clay, the spatial awareness of the body in relation to the clay, how much water is in the clay body – Is all secondary information. This background knowledge impacts how you interact and manipulate the materials.

Polyani's second distinction of tacit knowledge gives a dimension to human 'activity'. A separation between 'bodily activity' and 'conceptual activity', or in other words; mind and body. However, humans are embodied beings. We

are a combination of conceptual and bodily activity and can only be all mind or all body in theory. Cognition relies on the making of judgements, “both conceptual and embodied activity entail discrimination and decision” (Sorri, 1994) but not all decisions are made by the mind. While walking, we actively avoid obstacles and traverse uneasy surfaces without active thought, our body adjusts our environments without conceptual activity. Similarly, when we enter a state of flow, an element of positive psychology where we are completely absorbed in the task we are completing, it is possible for the body to ignore signs of fatigue and hunger as humans experience a ‘flow’ where we lose track of time. A flow state is described in positive psychology as:

A mental state in which a person is completely focused on a single task or activity. They are directing all their attention toward the task, and they do not experience many thoughts about themselves or their performance (Villines, 2022).

Tacit knowing stems from the interaction between subsidiary awareness and bodily activity while explicit knowledge is an interaction between focal awareness and conceptual activity. When applying what we know about tacit knowledge to materials, the same principles are expected as if we are learning another language. It is therefore the role of the maker to use the knowledge gained through exploration and practice to give form and function to a material and it is the choice of the maker in communicating what that material will now be. When a maker interacts with a material for the first time, they must be focally aware of the actions taken when working with it.

It is only through time and practice does the focal become subsidiary as makers begin to understand the complexities of the material and see their body as a tool in relation to the material.

Ceramics is often associated as a conversation between maker and material, especially in pottery. Where clay is seen as giving ‘messages’ to the hands when the work is being made on a pottery wheel. Human activity in the making of ceramics is primarily bodily with elements of conceptual. It is important that the maker is in tune with their body, as well as achieving an understanding of the body as a tool in the making process. It is necessary that a maker has a tacit understanding of their tools to influence their work and that includes the body. One of the first things learnt when learning to throw on a pottery wheel is centring. Centring is considered to be the most important and a crucial part of the making process. If the centring is off from the beginning, then it becomes very difficult to create a piece of work and can impact the overall process “any small differences in the clay at the first stage is amplified once you start pulling the walls thinner” (Humphries, 2019). It is only through doing the act of centring can someone centre correctly as instructing someone on how to centre is difficult and hard to articulate. Similarly, the act of pulling the walls of a vessel is another part of the making process that is heavily involved in tacit information. Someone might be able to articulate that the physical act of moving the clay using the hydrophobic surface allows our hands to influence where the clay goes which in turn allows the walls to grow in height. However, that does not explain the question of ‘how’ in terms of physically doing it. It is therefore necessary to practise

as pulling the walls too firm will result in a disproportion of clay that may lead to the vessel collapsing in on itself or simply ripping between the fingers. Conversely, pulling too soft will not move the clay to where the maker intends it to be, and the vessel may become bottom heavy or not reach the intended height. It is through trial and error or “indwelling” (Polanyi, M. 1966) that gives us the information that is required to make vessels on a pottery wheel effectively and informs our bodily activity the strength needed to effectively influence the direction and movement of the clay.

To conclude this chapter, tacit knowledge has a clear effect on a maker’s perception of materials. Makers with substantial amounts of tacit knowledge are often better equipped to decide what materials are the best tools to help communicate with. Tacit knowledge often compliments explicit knowledge and theoretical understanding, providing its practitioners with nuanced and context specific understanding of materials and therefore providing nuanced and context specific applications of the materials.

Chapter 2 – Case study of Antony Gormley's 'Field'



Fig 1 - Antony Gormley's - Field

Antony Gormley is a British sculptor whose work explores the human form and our place as human objects within the physical world. While exploring themes of human existence Gormley's work examines the relationship between the body and space, often using his own body as a template. *Field* is a series of installations, which encouraged the collaboration of the local communities, and has been constructed numerous times around the world. Each installation focused on the creation of several thousand small clay figures. The series began in 1989 comprising 150 terracotta figures shown in New York and has since grown to a 25,000-piece installation, reaching '200,000' in Asian field (2003). Gormley hires local communities to assist with the building and the making of the clay figures, going to places like Europe, the UK, Australia, South America, and Asia. Gormley's work – his own self cast pieces – reflect the body as a physical object but also as an instrument to

the human conscious experience. Experience that is personal, context specific, emotional, and reflects the time he spent in India studying Theravada Buddhism with a specific interest in Vipassana Meditation.

Vipassana means “to see things as they really are” (Goenka, N/a) and is an ancient meditation technique in India and represents the ‘art of living’, which encourages developing insight into oneself to further enhance an interconnectedness between mind and body. Gormley says through this process “you can make sculpture that is a reflective instrument rather than existing as a freeze frame in a narrative” (Gormley & Holborn, 2015) suggesting that sculpture can encase ‘being’ rather than ‘doing’. It was this Buddhist practice that gave him the idea of an “abstract body” (Gormley, 2021-2022) and is likely what inspires him to create a physical representation of this ‘abstract body’ using materials.



Fig 2 - Cast Beamers, 2009-18

Field is a work that is most interesting due to Gormley's detour from the average work he does which follows surrounding his own body in hard metal casts. The casts have no faces or no defining features other than the explorative shapes used to fill an 'abstract body'. The work (Field – *Fig 1*) looks outwards, no longer single, alone pieces but as a collective looking outwards at our collective future. Gormley has described Field as a "living organism" and has said "like water, it settles in place, it doesn't organise it" (Searle, 1996) meaning that together the individual pieces create a singular piece of work that fills the room. Due to the one way viewing of the piece the work looks as though it fills every crack and crevice of the space and goes on to put the size of humanity into perspective. Gormley uses the terracotta as the main material of his figures which represents the human population. The choice of using clay is important. Clay as a material represents humans better than any other and was specific and intended. The human body and the earth's crust share numerous similarities in chemical elements. For example, Gormley states that it is "something to do with the iron in the earth which is also the iron in our blood" that gives the clay its redness and is why he was drawn to using this type of clay, the finished pieces were bisque fired and left unglazed to preserve "a connection between flesh and planet" (Gormley, 2004). Clay as a material represents adaptability and change due to its malleability. Gormley's first iteration of the work in San Matias, Cholula, Mexico took iron rich clay from a local brickmaker and used that clay to create his figures. Gormley shows the changeability of the materials (clay) in relation to the maker's vision. Gormley claims he "liberated..." the clay "...from its des-

tiny of becoming a brick” (Gormley, 2004). It was also important that the individual figures be made by hand, each figure has a specific uniqueness, similar to the human race, and is shown through the slight variations of the shapes, see - *Fig 3*. The markings that make each individual figure unique would not have been achieved if the figures were cast and mass produced. It is after the process of shaping and the identity being given by the maker do these small lumps of clay gain form and meaning.



Fig 3 - Antony Gormley, Field (close)

The participants in making of the figures were given basic instruction, likely to encourage the information gained through tacit knowledge, this would then allow the pieces to be unique and personal to the maker, as each would own different participants' visions of making the representation of the human form. Participants were told that the figures needed to be “hand sized and easy to hold, eyes were to be deep, and closed and the head was to be in

proportion with the body” (Tate, 2004). The figures range from 8 – 26 cm tall and their eye line look over the horizon, apart from a few designated “stargazers” (Searle, 1996) that look upwards. These are often placed in the front rows of the installation as a greeting to the audience. The audience themselves are unable to enter the space that this installation occupies and can only enter through sight. Adrian Searle states “We stand on the threshold of their territory... they hold us at bay” (Searle, 1996) as if these inanimate objects have a say. As humans it is a cognitive bias to give non-human objects human attributes. This act is called anthropomorphism and is done to objects and items so that the human mind can relate and make better sense of what it is seeing, which is “why in primitive art the face can be reduced to such a minimal configuration and yet we still see a face” (Levinson, 2001). It is the mind appeasing a stereotype of the physical form of a human, due to the eyes and the shape of the body in proportion to the head. Participants stated while making “when pressing into the clay I felt like I was giving it a heart” (M Plus, 2003), while others stated that the figures needed to “Look up to towards the sky as if they were in deep thought, exploring, contemplating the progress of humanity” (M Plus, 2003). They were not only making the physicality of humanity, but also embedding it with human qualities, elevating the material above just being lumps of clay.

To conclude this chapter, Gormley’s role as a maker revolves around his ability to manipulate materials in a given space as a form of communication.

Gormley states “Art is the means by which we communicate what it feels like

to be alive... but art confronts life allowing it to stop and perhaps change direction” (Tate St Ives, 2001). The materials chosen were intended and specific. Clay represents change and adaptability but when fired and installed in this specific configuration they can be used to create feelings of introspection. It is imperative to note that if these figures were not made by hand using clay, they would lose the unique marks, shapes, and expressions or ‘imperfections’ that were embedded within, from the maker. It is therefore those marks made by touch that add value to the work.

Chapter 3 – Case study of Olafur Eliasson’s ‘Ice Watch’ and comparison

Olafur Eliasson is an Icelandic-Danish artist who makes captivating installations that encourage the awareness of one’s own senses. Eliasson’s work typically explores a manifestation of his research into “complex geometry, motion patterns and his interest in colour theory” (Tate, 2020). However, the focus of this chapter is into Eliasson’s engagement with society and environment. Specifically, his work ‘Ice watch’ installed in Copenhagen, Paris and London that gave his audience a “direct and tangible experience of the reality of melting arctic ice” (Eliasson, 2014), see - *Fig 4*.



Fig 4 - Olafur Eliasson, Ice watch 2014

Ice watch entailed bringing twelve large blocks of ice that were cast off the Greenland ice sheet and harvested from a fjord outside Nuuk. The Ice was kept intact and shipped to the different countries and presented in a clock-like formation in a large public space, to slowly melt as the day went on. This presentation emphasises the time running out on tackling the issues caused by climate change. Eliasson's work encouraged his audience to use their focal awareness by touching, listening, and engaging with the ice. He states, "Feeling the cold on your hand and knowing that ice is cold is actually two different things" (Arctic Ice Art displayed in Paris, 2015). Knowing the coldness without touching it first would be applying tacit knowledge, as it is information the participants have likely experienced before (the sensation of ice being cold) which informs how they interact with it now. However, it is only through actively touching the ice do the participants engage their focal awareness alongside their bodily activity, with time and active participation

the feeling of cold becomes subsidiary and participants are able to appreciate the other information gained from the experience, like the sound of the ice “cracking, hopping, crisp noise because the melting releases pressure bubbles that have been stuck in the ice for 10,000 years” (Yalcinkaya, 2018) as well as the emotional effect on the body.

Touch as a sense is undervalued as a form of engaging in art. Within western culture, art is primarily made to be viewed and heard but not touched. Although, the benefits of tactility offer a deeper connection to the work as it adds another sensory dimension to experience and a more intimate exploration. Touch also creates inclusivity by breaking down the barriers of artistic expression to allow those with impairments to engage and experience art.

Due to the large amount of artwork being put behind glass in a white cubed space, touch within art has become a taboo. As humans, touch and tactility have played a key role in our survival and it is through touch we gain most of our tacit understanding. “Of the various forms in which the senses are said to operate, the sense of sight has been, historically, the most privileged, whilst touch, [...], has been less well served” (Mitchell, 2012). It is an individual's need for understanding that leads them to want to touch. For a more informed understanding of the material, and therefore more tacit understanding, it is important to include multiple senses. Eliasson encourages individuals to physically interact with his work, stating “this project is really about connecting what we know with what we are” (UN Climate Change, 2015). Eliasson believes that giving knowledge a physical body allows people to more

easily understand the concepts that artwork communicate. Being able to interact and touch allows the audience to engage their tacit knowing through experiencing haptic feedback. In Ice Watch specifically, concepts of climate change and climate action are represented through a physical body, the ice, as “it shows us what they talk about at the COP21 is real and not something abstract” (UN Climate Change, 2015). The ephemeral nature of the ice blocks emphasises the impact of climate change which makes the tactile interaction with the ice a more impactful and memorable experience. Similar to Gormley’s work of creating a population of small clay figures to stare back at the audience. Both aim to communicate using the symbolic connotations of the materials because it is easier to show using familiar materials than it is using words to explain.

Both Gormley and Eliasson use materials as a method of creating a physical representation of abstract ideas (Human body as an object in space and Climate change). The difference between the two is that Gormley evokes more emotional internal understanding from the audience by having them stand on the outside looking in with limited movement amongst the installation while Eliasson evokes a physical external understanding by allowing the audience to participate, discuss and touch the artwork. In the context of tacit knowledge, Gormley targets the conceptual activity to invoke a response from the audience while Eliasson is interested in the bodily activity to produce a response. Being able to walk through or around the two works offers the audience an embodied experience where they become part of the exhibition rather than just audience members viewing it. This is important as both artists encourage

a level of introspection about our place in the world, the effect we have on it and our future within it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, tacit knowledge impacts a maker's ability to communicate complex ideas through materials. Through the two concepts outlined in chapter one, a combination of awareness and activity is necessary in the intentional training of tacit knowledge. It is only when a maker can tacitly know the boundaries and capabilities of materials as well as their historical, contextual, and symbolic representations can they effectively communicate their ideas in tandem with the appropriate materials to an audience. Tactility and materials play an integral role in creating a more profound and productive connection between audience and artwork. It is the combination of ideas and choice of material that can elevate a piece of work beyond just being matter in a physical sense to having a meaning and a purpose. Gormley and Eliassons work, using tactile engagement alongside materials that have symbolic connotations, enhances an audience's appreciation and understanding within their respected pieces, creating a memorable experience for viewers. However, because of tacit knowledge's subjectiveness and context specific nature, it makes it challenging to identify and determine the threshold of when someone has 'enough' tacit knowledge. The process itself of accumulating knowledge is subjective to individual experiences, complexity of information and willingness to engage in reflective learning. Despite this, while it is difficult to quantify how much tacit knowledge is necessary, an individual with

more experience and therefore more tacit knowledge is better equipped to work with materials as well as troubleshoot complications that may arise.

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