

Student Name: Hannah Davies

Student Number: 2004220

Programme of Study: 3D Design Crafts

Module: ADAD5004 Research in Practice

Word Count: 2422

Tutor Name: Julia Lockheart

Three Keywords: Touch, Body, Material

In preparation for the independent project, I will be researching the words touch, body and material. The words that I have chosen are related to my work as a maker and the discipline of craft. The essay explores the words in a historical context, with references to artists such as Constantin Brancusi, Karen Finley and Antony Gormley, and theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Ann-Sophie Lehmann and Geraldine Johson.

The first word that is related to my practice is touch, which is the first sense to develop in the embryo (Montagu, 1978, p.2). The whole body is capable of receiving touch but the forehead, torso and the fingers are the most sensitive (Myles & Binseel, 2007). Touch greatly contributes to the “cognitive, brain and socio-emotional development” (Davis, Petrella & Rovers, 2017, p.14) and when touch is not present during development, “long-lasting negative effects take place, in terms of attachment injuries and touch wounds” (Davis, Petrella & Rovers, 2017, p.15). In terms of the history of art and sculpture, touch was a factor that was not greatly considered until early modern Italy (c. 1450) (Johnson, 2002, p. 61). Artists began to consider the sense as an important way for three-dimensional objects to be confronted by the viewer (Johnson, 2002, p. 61) and it has continued to be of “growing importance in artistic production” (Gallace & Spence, 2016, p. 114) in contemporary art. Therefore, though touch is an integral part of development, it was not thought to be a part of art and making until a few centuries ago, and it has only begun to play a significant part in making recently.

Prior to the Italian Renaissance, vision was dominantly viewed as the most important out of all the senses (ocularcentrism). Philosophers Plato and Aristotle were prominent figures who held this view, and it was not until the Renaissance where philosophers and writers began to open the debate about the senses. Touch was considered as a “less cerebral” and “more carnal” sense than vision (Johson, 2016,

p. 61) and this view persisted until the Middle Ages. In the context of my practice, touch and sight are both equally considered when creating a piece. In many instances, choices are based upon the tactility of the piece rather than the aesthetic quality. An example of this is when polishing a piece of glass that has two sheets of glass bonded together. Fingers are run across the glass object to detect if the join is evident. If the join is noticeable to the touch, polishing is continued until smooth. Touch is more sensitive to the tactility of the form and the eye alone is unable to make this decision.



Fig. 1: A Sculpture for the Blind

Touch is also an important element within my practice in relation to sculpture, which is the form that is used the most within my work. An artist who also greatly illustrates the sense of touch as an integral part of making is Constantin Brancusi, who once said that “sculpture must be lovely to touch, friendly to live with, not only well made” (Tacha, 1963, pp. 240, 241), which is reflected in his piece in *A Sculpture for the Blind* (1920 – *Figure 1*). The sculpture is made of veined marble and it is the rough shape of an egg, measuring 17.5 x 29.5 x 18cm. The piece’s intention is to be touched, and Brancusi considered all elements of touch when creating the piece.

Firstly, it is easily embraceable. Clayton described the object as fitting “easily on[to] your lap” and it would “take two hands to hold comfortably” (2017). Secondly, the piece is incredibly smooth. Brancusi was said to be “very fastidious about the finishing of his works” and he would personally smooth and polish the piece with “great care until he obtained the perfect surface quality’s he longed for” (Barassi, 2016, p. 174). Thirdly, due to the nature of marble and its high density, the object is heavy and lastly, again due to the nature of marble, the sculpture is cold to the touch.

Brancusi would place his sculptures upon his knees and touch them with his eyes closed, it was not only his way of enjoying the finished piece, but “an integral part to its making” (Barassi, 2016, p. 174). Being able to enjoy a sculpture through its tactility and physicality is something that is accessible for all, which the title *A Sculpture for the Blind* suggests. However, the paradox of this piece is that the sculpture is now displayed in a glass vitrine in the Museum of Art in Philadelphia, therefore a piece intended for the blind is now enclosed and on show for the sighted.

The second word that relates to my practice is body. It is defined as “the whole physical structure of a human or an animal” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, 2022) and it is “central to how we understand facets of identity such as gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity” (MOMA, 2022). How one presents their body can either align or rebel against social conventions (MOMA, 2022), signifying that the body is a powerful form of communication.

In my personal practice, the conceptual element of the female body is explored. The body of a woman has been the object of male desires for centuries (Suleiman, 1986, p. 7) and the ideals of “female beauty has shifted from a symbol of fertility to one of

mathematically calculated proportions”, which is evident through analysing depictions of female bodies by artists throughout history (Bonafini & Pozzilli, 2010). The artists who have documented these changes provide a good indication of how society saw women.



Fig. 2: Venus of Willendorf



Fig. 3: The Birth of Venus

The Venus of Willendorf (30,000 – 25,000 BCE) (*Figure 2*) is one of the oldest portrayals of woman. The statue depicts a “bulging” stomach and “large breasts”, suggesting that the culture idolized a mother goddess (Bonafini & Pozzilli, 2011) and that the figure was a fertility symbol (Zygmunt, 2022). This depiction of the female body, in comparison to *Figure 3* documents the change from women being seen as a fertility symbol to one who is the object of the Male Gaze.

Figure 3, The Birth of Venus (1484 – 1486), painted by Sandro Botticelli, portrays Venus, the ancient goddess of beauty and love (Hoena, 2003, p. 5), nude and emerging from the water. The painting was created during the Renaissance and at

this time an artist's skill laid in their ability to "show perception in the body of the nude woman" (Zhoa, 2017, p. 106). The paintings of this period were mostly created by men, and as the paintings of the Renaissance reflected the ideals of beauty at the time (Zhoa, 2017, p. 110), men therefore dictated women's beauty standards.

The fact that Venus is portrayed as nude, signifying "lust and erotic pleasure" (Zhoa, 2017, p. 106) implies that the painting was intended for the male audience. This demonstrates that the painting is the object of the Male Gaze (Mulvey, 1989) which is further emphasized by Venus' strategically painted hands which cover her breasts and pubic area. This is designed to titillate the man while conveying modesty.



Fig. 4: Karen Finley tossing candies at the audience in The Constant State of Desire

Karen Finley's performances (*Figure 4*) outlines another change in attitude towards the female body. Finley was aware that a women's body was typically seen as an "object of the gaze, an object of desire" when appearing on stage (Striff, 1997). In *The Constant State of Desire* (1988) she presented her almost nude body in a way that subverted the Male Gaze by talking about her body in a graphic way and not

displaying her body for the spectators' approval (Striff, 1997). This greatly contrasts to how women's bodies were received in the art sphere during this period and throughout history, which The Guerrilla Girls highlighted in their piece *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?* (Figure 5 - 1989). The piece revealed that "less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female", demonstrating that "women in the art world are therefore [exist for] exploration and objection only" (Cronje, 2001). Finley actively disengages with this narrative by purposely making the audience feel uncomfortable during her performances, by urging the viewer to question the "personal and public costs of sexism, homophobia, and racism" (Pellegrini, 2007). Her body is therefore present to communicate and begin a narrative between the audience and herself, rather than to be treated as a passive object which is reminiscent of Figure 3.

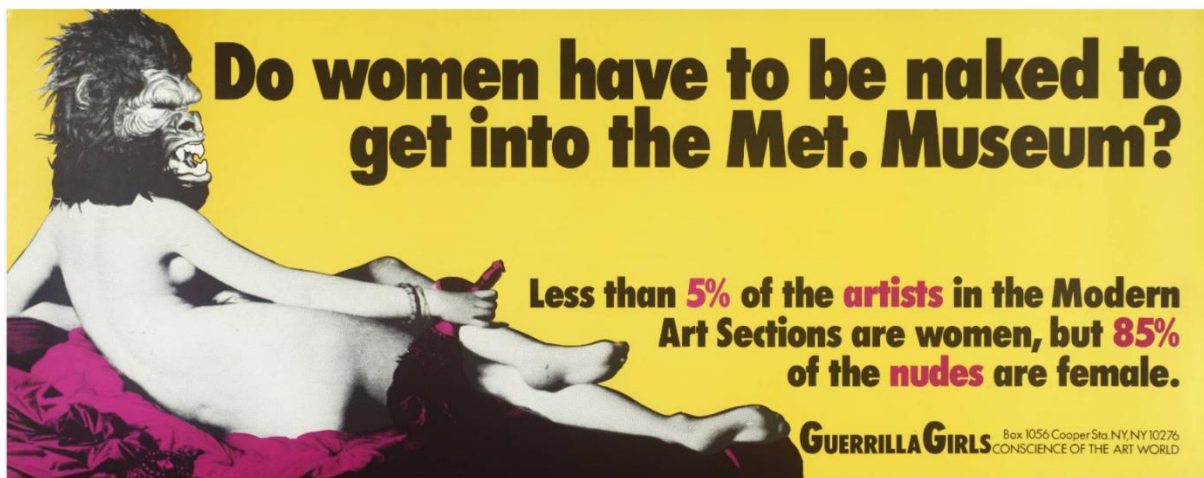


Fig. 5: Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?

During a segment of her performance for *The Constant State of Desire*, Finley communicates a women's experience of living in a patriarchal society. She exclaims, "I've never been treated equally my entire life... like I'm supposed to be so thankful cause a chick is on the Supreme Court...But nothing's changed. Nothing has changed" (1988). Her performances communicate her own experiences while also

giving a voice to marginalised people and these experiences play a significant role as an artist. This relates to my practice as my own experiences and body are used in my work and it is combined with my discipline, craft.

The third word that has relevance to my practice is materials. Materials are an integral part to our existence and as Ashby and Johnson state in *Materials and Design*, “we live in a world of materials; it is materials that give substance to everything we see and touch” (2013). The political developments, technical advancements, the wars, and economic and social changes of the late 19th century contributed to significant change in how people viewed the existing world in the 20th century, and it is within this century where artists were exploring the boundaries of artistic expression (Ruhrburg et al, 2000, p.7). Artists realised that a piece of art no longer had to be “be made in the spirit of the old aesthetics of imitation”, but as its’ “own independent dimension of existence” (Ruhrburg et al, 2000, p.7). This was greatly reflected in the change of how materials were used in art and the subject matter of the creations.

Materials are always required to be in contact with another (Lehmann, 2012) and it is within this connectivity where art is formed. Materials undergo numerous processes and interactions with other materials before they are able to be used as a medium, and the materials are still interacting with one another when a piece of work has been completed (Lehmann, 2012). Within craft the connectivity between materials is an integral part of making. Craft greatly depends on numerous processes and these processes require materials, such as making a plaster cast, which, for example, clay,

plaster, an object, a container, and something to securely hold the mould together is required.

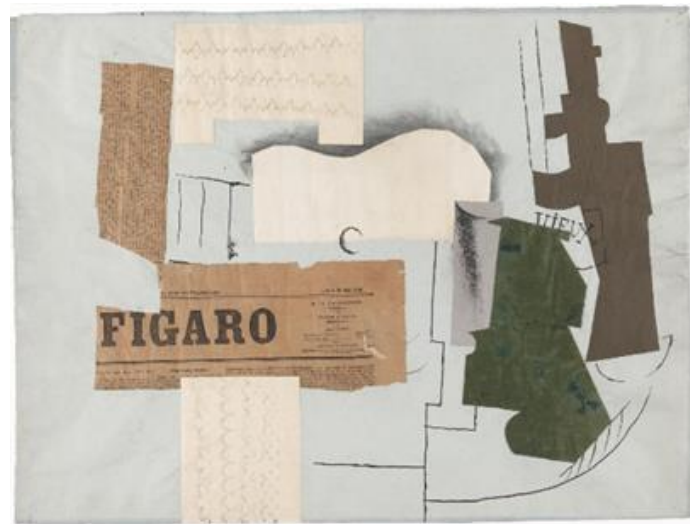


Fig. 6: Bottle of Vieux Marc, Glass, Guitar and Newspaper

Collage is an example of the importance of material connectivity and in *Figure 6's* instance, this connectivity is also visual. *Bottle of Vieux Marc, Glass, Guitar and Newspaper* (Figure 6) is an example of Cubist collage and was created by Pablo Picasso in 1913. Picasso, alongside Braque, both created numerous paper collages between 1912 and 1913 (Kear, 2016) and their technique reflects the change in how materials were utilised and how artistic concepts were conveyed. Though the materials that Picasso used in this composition are traditional (paper, pen), the ideas represented were modern for the time. In my practice, a significant element is the combination of traditional processes and materials with contemporary concepts. I am currently working on a piece which confronts Texas' gun laws, but also combining the concept with the traditional process of slip casting.

Braque and Picasso are also credited with introducing everyday materials into art which they did so through Cubist collage (Evans, 2004 p. 185). This is a significant factor as their introduction of everyday materials into their art marks the beginning of

how other artists introduced and experimented with unconventional materials during the 20th century (Tate, 2022). Minimalism (1960s) and Arte Povera (1960s – 1970s) both implemented found and unconventional materials (Moma, 2022 and Tate, 2022), which I do within my own practice by exploring concepts through casts of everyday and unconventional items. Antony Gormley also employed materials in a different manner, which is evident in *Figure 7* as he used his own body as the prime source.



Fig. 7: Three Ways: Mould, Hole and Passage

Figure 7, Three Ways: Mould, Hole and Passage (1981-82) is one of Gormley's earliest pieces where he uses casts from his own body (Manchester, 2000). He took inspiration from Carl Ander's and Donald Judd's use of found objects and industrial materials in their art of the Minimalism movement which prompted Gormley to question if he could treat his body as a found object (Gormley, 2016). He then began to use it "as the tool, as the subject, as the material..." (Gormley, 2016) which relates to my personal work as my body and its experiences are a key part of my inspiration. In this piece he created casts from his body with plaster covered sheets and then the

bodies were cast in lead and soldered together (Macpherson, 2019). This piece depended on the connection between Gormley and the plaster and Gormley participating as the critical material.

In conclusion, this proposal has explored and contextualized the three keywords in relation to my personal practice as a maker and in the context of craft. Each keyword has been explored through its historical context, and the images chosen reflect the changes in attitudes of the word in relation to the history of art and sculpture. The proposal outlined the sense of touch becoming of more significance in Modern and contemporary art, and the female body's transformation from being a fertility symbol to one that is the object of the male gaze which is evident through the depictions of female bodies in art and sculpture. The proposal also highlighted the importance of the connection between materials to create art and introduction of unconventional materials into art and sculpture in the 20th century. It is evident through this body of research that the keywords touch, body and material are linked to one another, the body being the receptor of touch, the material effecting the different aspects of touch within a piece, and the body being employed as a material. This has led me to the working research question of '*To what degree has material and process exploration of the 20th century had an impact on sculpture and art?*'. Within this proposal, there are numerous sub-questions that can be explored including '*How do different materials effect the sensory aspect of art?*', and '*Are touch and sight the only senses that impact the production of art?*'. These questions will provide the basis for the final inquiry next year.

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Illustrations

Figure One: Brancusi, C. (c.1920) *Sculpture for the Blind* [Sculpture] Available at: <https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/51125> [Accessed 27 Mar. 2022].

Figure Two: Unknown (c. 30000) *Venus of Willendorf* [Sculpture] Available at: <https://mymodernmet.com/the-venus-of-willendorf/> [Accessed 5 Apr. 2022].

Figure Three: Botticelli, A. (c. 1484 to 1486) *The Birth of Venus* [Tempera on canvas] Available at: <https://artincontext.org/the-birth-of-venus-botticelli/> [Accessed 10 Apr. 2022].

Figure Four: Finley, A. (1987) *The Constance State of Desire* [Photograph] Available at: http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/reviews/pho/ho4-25-07_detail.asp?picnum=8 [Accessed 8 Apr. 2022].

Figure Five: Guerrilla Girls (1989) *Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?* [Screenprint on paper] Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/guerrilla-girls-do-women-have-to-be-naked-to-get-into-the-met-museum-p78793> [Accessed 19 Apr. 2022].

Figure Six: Picasso, P. (1913) *Bottle of Vieux Marc, Glass, Guitar and Newspaper* [Collage] Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/picasso-bottle-of-vieux-marc-glass-guitar-and-newspaper-t00414> [Accessed 15 Apr. 2022].

Figure Seven: Gormley, A. (1981-2) *Three Ways: Mould, Hole and Passage* [Lead and plaster] Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gormley-three-ways-mould-hole-and-passage-t07015> [Accessed 18 Apr. 2022].