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*Question: How can the material qualities and entropic conditions of obsolete mechanical objects be used to transform their meaning and function within contemporary art practice?*

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## Introduction

This essay explores the creative potential of mechanical parts that have exceeded their original function, focusing on how they can be reinterpreted through artistic processes. My practise involves collecting discarded or obsolete components and transforming them through etching, allowing them to exist beyond their intended industrial purpose. Rather than treating these materials as neutral surfaces, I approach them as objects that already contain history, wear and physical presence.

The key concepts that underpin this investigation are materiality, entropy and transformation. Each of these ideas provides a different way of understanding how materials operate within my work. Materiality focuses on the physical qualities of the metal, including texture, weight and surface condition, and how these influence both process and meaning. Entropy considers the effects of time, decay and deterioration, particularly in relation to rust and wear, and how these processes challenge ideas of permanence and control. Transformation explores how objects can shift in meaning when they are removed from their original context and altered through artistic intervention.

These concepts are not separate, but closely interconnected within my practise. The material condition of the objects directly affects how they can be worked with, while their entropic state influences the outcome of the etching process. At the same time, the act of transforming these materials into artworks raises questions about value, function and authorship.

My interest in this theme is also shaped by my experience working with mechanical materials outside of an art context. This has given me a practical understanding of how these objects function, as well as how they deteriorate over time. By bringing this knowledge into my creative practise, I am to explore how industrial materials can be reinterpreted within a contemporary art context, where their physical and conceptual qualities are given new significance.

## Materiality

Materiality is a key concept within contemporary art as it shifts focus away from representation and towards the physical substance of the artwork itself. Rather than acting as

a passive surface, materials play an active role in shaping both the visual outcome and the meaning of a piece. As Petra Lange Berndt (2015) argues, materials are not neutral carriers of ideas but are embedded with cultural, sensory and historical significance. This suggests that the way a material looks, feels and behaves can communicate meaning independently of the artist's intended imagery.



Figure 1: Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, 1981

Artists who prioritise materiality often emphasise the inherent qualities of their chosen media instead of attempting to fully control or disguise them. For example, Richard Serra's large-scale steel sculpture *Tilted Arc* (1981) demonstrates how material can dominate both space and experience. The work consists of a curved steel plate installed within a public environment, where its scale and weight force the viewer to navigate around it physically.

The industrial nature of steel is not hidden; instead, its surface, mass and placement become the focus. This creates an awareness of how material occupies space and affects the body, reinforcing the idea that materiality is central to meaning rather than secondary to it (Serra, 1994).



Figure 2: El Anatsui, *Earth's Skin*, 2009

Similarly, El Anatsui explores materiality through works such as *Earth's Skin* (2009). From a distance, the piece appears textile-like, but it is constructed from thousands of recycled aluminium bottle caps. The reflective surfaces, irregular textures and flexible structures allow the material to shift depending on how it is displayed. Importantly, the work retains visible

traces of its previous use, linking the material to histories of consumption and labour. As Binder (2010) notes, Anatsui's work demonstrates how materials can carry layered meanings, combining their physical properties with cultural and historical associations.

This understanding of materiality directly informs my own creative practice; my work focuses on mechanical parts that have exceeded their original purpose, which I then alter through etching. Unlike traditional art materials such as canvas or paper, these metal objects already contain visible signs of use, including scratches, corrosion and wear. These marks are not removed but instead become part of the artwork. They act as evidence of the object's previous life, embedding a sense of history into the material itself.

This etching process further reinforces the importance of materiality in my work. The outcome is heavily influenced by the physical properties of the metal, including its hardness, texture and condition. The etched lines are physically cut into the surface, meaning the material directly shapes the image that is produced. This can be unpredictable, as corrosion or uneven surfaces can distort or interrupt the etched mark. As Tim Ingold (2013) suggests, making can be understood as a collaboration between the artist and the material, where the properties of the material guide the outcome as much as the artist's intentions. This idea strongly relates to my process, as I often have to respond to the limitations and behaviours of the metal rather than controlling it.

In addition, my experience working with mechanical components outside of an artistic context has significantly influenced my approach to material. My familiarity with metal through a working environment means that I understand its functional properties, durability and limitations. This positions my practise between industrial labour and fine art, as the

materials I use are not traditionally associated with artistic production. By bringing these objects into an art context, I challenge value, allowing the material to exist in both contexts simultaneously.

Overall, materiality is central to my work because the meaning of the artwork is inseparable from the physical qualities of the materials used. The mechanical parts I work with are not blank surfaces but active elements that shape both the process and the outcome. Through etching and recontextualization, I allow the material to retain its history while also taking in new meaning. This reflects a broader contemporary approach to art, where materials are understood not as a passive tool, but as essential contributors to the production of meaning.

## Entropy

Entropy is a concept that originates from science, referring to the gradual decline into disorder within a system over time. In an artistic context, entropy is often used to describe processes of decay, deterioration and transformation. Rather than resisting these processes, many artists embrace entropy as a way of exploring time, impermanence and the limits of control. Entropy challenges the idea that artworks should remain fixed or preserved, instead highlighting that all material is subject to change.



Figure 3: Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled (12 Horses)*, 1969

Artists such as Jannis Kounellis explore entropy through the use of raw, industrial materials. In worlds like *Untitled (12 Horses)*, Kounellis brought live horses into a gallery space, emphasising presence, instability and the unpredictability of living systems. In other works, he used materials such as coal, metal, and burlap, which naturally degrade or shift over time. As he states, his work focuses on “real materials in real space,” emphasising presence and physical change rather than permanence (Kounellis, 2002, P . 45). This highlights how entropy can be understood not only as physical decay but also as instability and unpredictability.

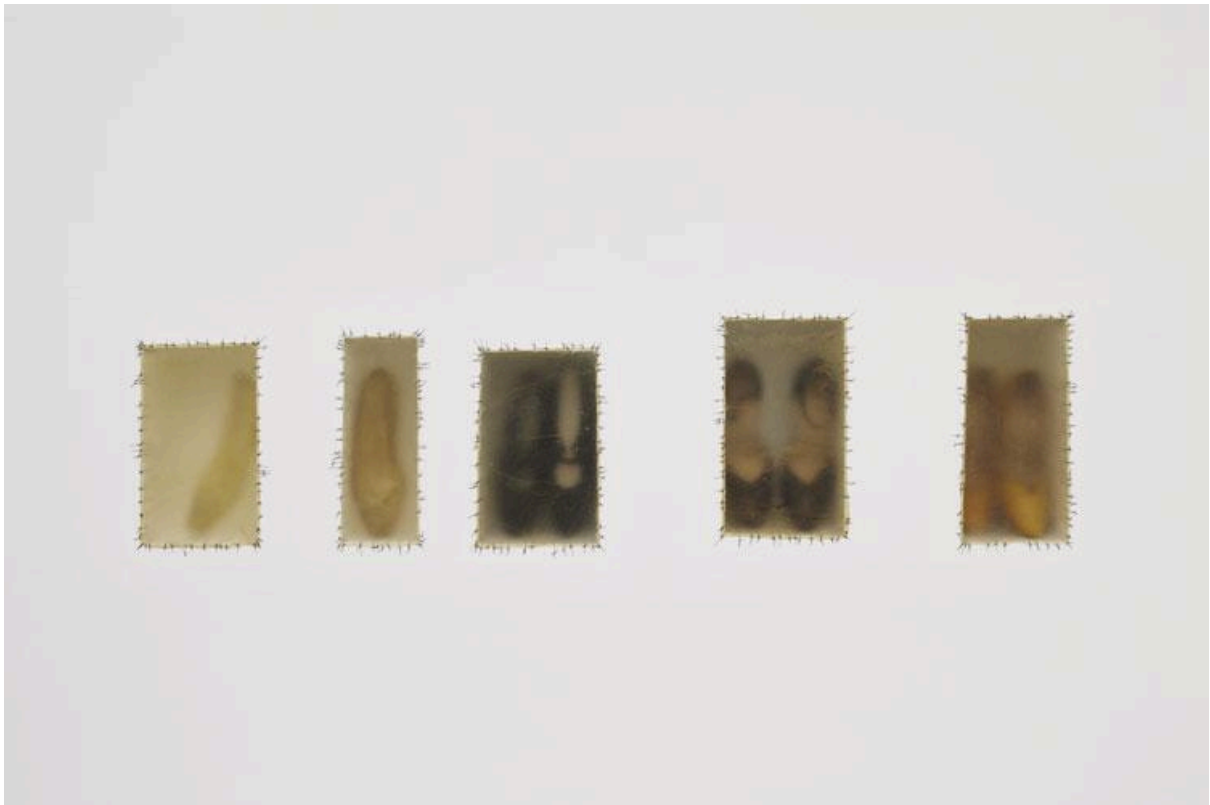


Figure 4: Doris Salcedo, *Areabiliarois*, 1996

A similar engagement with entropy can be seen in the work of Doris Salcedo, particularly in *Atrabiliarios*. This installation presents worn shoes embedded into gallery walls and covered with translucent membranes. The materials appear aged, fragile and partially obscured, suggesting a sense of disappearance and loss over time. Although the work is not actively decaying, it evokes entropy through its visual language of erosion and absence. According to Salcedo, her work aims to make “absence visible” (Salcedo, 2015, P. 78), which connects to the idea that entropy can operate conceptually as well as physically. The materials carry traces of time and human experience, reinforcing the idea that deterioration can hold meaning.

These ideas strongly connect to my own practise, particularly in my use of mechanical parts that already exist in a state of deterioration. The objects I work with are often rusted,

scratched, or worn down from their original function. Instead of restoring them, I intentionally preserve these signs of damage. For me, corrosion and wear are not flaws but evidence of time and use. They show that the object has undergone a process of decline, which becomes a key part of the artwork.

When I etch into these surfaces, I am working with materials that are already unstable. The presence of rust and uneven textures can affect how the etched lines appear, sometimes interrupting or distorting the image. This reduces my control over the outcome and requires me to respond to the material's condition. In this sense, the process reflects entropy, as the materials resist being fully shaped or stabilised. Instead of producing a clean and predictable result, the image is influenced by ongoing processes of deterioration.

My experience working with mechanical components also shapes how I understand entropy. In an industrial context, wear and degradation are usually seen as problems that need to be corrected. Parts are replaced to maintain efficiency and prevent failure. However, within my artwork, these same signs of breakdown become valuable. By bringing these materials into an art context, I challenge the idea that deterioration is purely negative. Instead, I treat decay as something that adds meaning, texture and history to the work.

Entropy also introduces a temporal dimension to my practise. The materials I use are not fixed, as rust can continue to develop and surfaces may change over time. This means the artwork is never entirely stable, but exists within an ongoing process of transformation. This reflects a broader shift within contemporary art away from permanence and towards an acceptance of change. As a result, entropy becomes not just a condition of material, but a central concept that shapes both process and meaning of my work.

## Transformation

Transformation is a key concept within contemporary art, referring to the process of changing the meaning, function or identity of an object. This can occur physically, through repositioning an object within a new context. In many cases, transformation challenges traditional ideas of value by shifting attention away from the original purpose and towards new interpretations. As Nicolas Bourriaud suggests, contemporary art often involves “the reprogramming of existing forms” (Bourriaud, 2002, P. 13), where artists reuse and reinterpret materials to generate new meaning.



Figure 5: Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913

One of the most influential of transformations in art can be seen in the works of Marcel Duchamp. His piece *Bicycle Wheel* is considered one of the first “readymades,” where an everyday object is removed from its original context and presented as art. By placing a bicycle wheel on a stool, Duchamp transformed a functional object into something purely

conceptual. The object itself was not significantly altered, but its meaning was completely changed. This act challenged the idea that art must be handcrafted or visually complex, instead suggesting that meaning can be created through context and intention (de Duve, 1996).



Figure 6: Joseph Beuys, *Fat Chair*, 1964-85

Transformation is also explored through physical processes, as seen in the work of Joseph Beuys. In works such as *Fat Chair*, Beuys uses materials like fat and wood, which changed over time. The fat gradually softens, melts or decays, altering the form of the piece. This introduces a process of transformation that continues beyond that artist's initial intervention. Beuys believed that materials could carry energy and meaning, and that transformation was

not only physical but also symbolic (Tisdall, 1979). This highlights how change itself can become central to the artworks.

These ideas directly relate to my own practice, where transformation occurs through both material intervention and conceptual recontextualization. I work with mechanical parts that have already fulfilled their purpose and are no longer considered useful. By selecting these objects and bringing them into an artistic context, I shift their role from functional components to artworks. This process alone creates a level of transformation, as the object is no longer defined by its original use.

However, transformation in my work also occurs through the physical act of etching. By cutting into the surfaces of the metal, I permanently alter the object, adding new imagery and meaning. This process changes how the object is perceived, as it becomes both a mechanical fragment and a visual surface. Unlike Duchamp's readymades, where the object is largely unchanged, my work involves direct interaction with the material, making the transformation both conceptual and physical.

My experience working with mechanical materials further shapes this approach. In a working environment, materials are valued based on performance and reliability, and once they fail, they are replaced. In contrast, my practise focuses on what remains after the point of failure. Instead of seeing these objects as redundant, I treat them as starting points for new forms of expression. The shift in perspective allows me to question how value is assigned, particularly in relation to labour and material use.

Overall, transformation in my practice is not about completely changing an object into something unrecognisable, but about extending its meaning. By combining recontextualisation with physical alteration, I allow mechanical parts to exist between past and present functions. This reflects a broader approach with contemporary art, where transformation is used to challenge fixed definitions of purpose and to explore how materials can carry multiple identities at once.

## Conclusion

Through the exploration of materiality, entropy and transformation, this project has developed a deeper understanding of how mechanical objects can be reinterpreted within contemporary art practise. Each concept has contributed a different perspective on how meaning is produced through materials. Materiality has highlighted the importance of the physical qualities of the object I use, particularly the textures, weight and surface conditions that influence both the making process and the outcome. These qualities are not secondary to the work but are central to how it is experienced.

Entropy has further extended this understanding by introducing the role of time and deterioration. The rust, wear and corrosion present in the mechanical parts are not simply signs of damage, but evidence of their history and use. By preserving these conditions, I allow the materials to remain active within the work, rather than attempting to return them to a fixed or original state. This approach challenges traditional ideas of permanence and control, instead embracing instability and changes as meaningful elements.

Transformation brings these ideas together by demonstrating how objects can shift in purpose and interpretation. Through both recontextualisation and the physical act of etching, the

mechanical parts move beyond their original function and take on new roles as artworks. However, the objects exist between states, carrying both their industrial history and their new artistic identity.

Overall, my practise operates within a balance between intention and material response, while I introduce imagery and direction through etching, the condition of the material continues to influence the outcome. This creates a process that is both controlled and unpredictable. By working in this way, I aim to challenge fixed ideas of value and function, showing how discarded materials can be reconsidered through artistic intervention.

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