

## ***“Introduction: Material Affinities”***

This is the second consecutive issue of *WRECK* devoted to the proceedings from the annual Graduate Student Symposium of the Art History, Visual and Theory Department. “Material Affinities: Intersections That Matter,” a two-day student-led interdisciplinary symposium held February 2009, investigated the notion of materiality as a methodology in scholarly approaches towards artistic and cultural production.

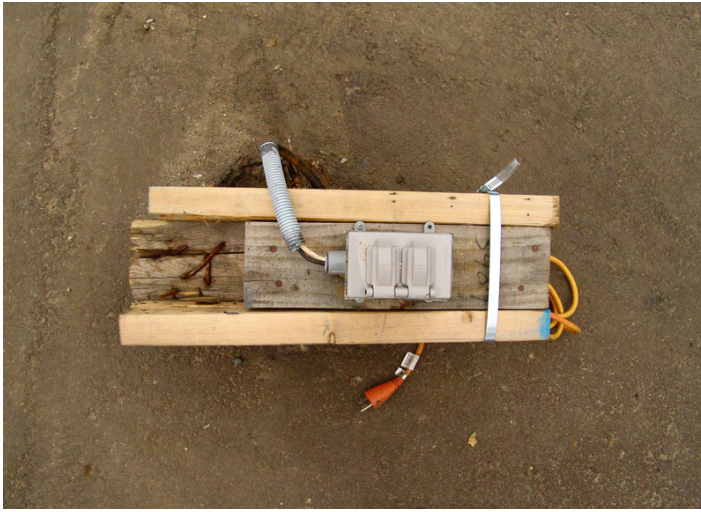
The impetus for the theme of materiality stemmed from the required methodologies course in which the work of Bruno Latour, Webb Keane and Alfred Gell prompted lengthy discussion and debate. Concurrent to the students’ engagement with this idea, the department at large was also grappling with the notion of materiality as a framework for artistic and art historical investigation: the 2008-2009 Joan Carlisle-Irving lecture series was entitled “The Politics of Materiality and Matters of the Biopolitical”; the Visual Arts faculty presented an exhibit of their work entitled “What Matter?” in September 2009; a Winter 2009 Medieval graduate seminar was entitled “The Ineluctable Materiality of Spirituality: Towards a Critical Rethinking of the Spiritual Component in Medieval Art”. The timeliness of the theme is also reflected in the number of international symposia and conferences concerning the topic, including a Spring 2008 conference entitled “Materialism and Materiality of the Image” at the University of California (Berkeley) and “Visuality/Materiality: Reviewing Theory, Method, and Practice” in July 2009 at Durham University in the United Kingdom. Thus, as we embarked upon our planning of this event, we were surrounded by fervent discussion of materiality as an issue of great significance, both within the faculty and student body and amongst scholars across the humanities. From within this intellectual milieu, it was our intention to provide a forum for emerging scholars to take part in the discussion, alongside fellow artists, critics, art historians and others interested in cultural production.

Materiality has offered art historians a means of retaining an interest in context while reinvesting in the formal and material qualities of an art object. Attending to both humans and things allows us to treat social relations and material culture equally by focusing on the networks of their intersections. Materiality is, thus, a theoretically and philosophically embedded concept that can describe the substance or quality of a thing, demanding attention to the relationships that it solicits from surrounding human agents. Materiality does not only describe the physical quality of an entity, whether organic or inorganic – it can also encompass the ephemeral, the theoretical, and the substantive nature of an exchange, a touch, or words. This conceptualization allows a fundamental rethinking of the body-object encounter and challenges the high degree of agency assumed of human actors. Probing the boundaries of subject and object, materiality has the potential to assemble these seemingly distinct entities while still attending to the spaces created by their reciprocity.

Materiality is an exciting methodology in part because of its relevance across the humanities in history, theory, and practice. Josh Hite’s photography was featured in our promotional materials and a selection of these photographs are included here (Fig. 1– 6). These digital photographs grapple to varying degree with the issues of perception, as well as the human fascination and association with objects. In this sense the performance of vehicle block heater outlets and pylons, or natural phenomena such as water droplets and grass growth patterns, are allowed to speak for themselves. Rather significantly, some of these objects also rely on human intervention to function in the world as things – as, for instance, with the heater outlets – to malfunction and subvert expectations.

Thus, the 2009 UBC AHVA Graduate Symposium sought to interrogate the role of the material in the formation of intersubjectivity, social bodies, classificatory systems and corporeal others. To this end, we sought papers that reexamined the relationality of bodies and things at the intersection of social, ideological, epistemological, and/or technological shifts, both contemporary and historical. In the original selection of submissions, we sought to foreground the inclusive nature of materiality and prioritized an innovative and interdisciplinary approach that would include research, investigation, and production of many kinds. Accordingly, for this issue of *WRECK* we, as guest editors, have selected papers that reflect the diversity of issues and topics which can be elucidated, whether implicitly or explicitly, through the notion of materiality.





**Fig. 1.** Josh Hite, *Parking Plug*, 2008, digital photo.



**Fig. 4.** Josh Hite, *Windshield/water*, 2008, digital photo.



**Fig. 2.** Josh Hite, *Parking Plug Smashed*, 2008, digital photo.



**Fig. 5.** Josh Hite, *Grass Crack*, 2008, digital photo.



**Fig. 3.** Josh Hite, *Pylons*, 2008, digital photo.



**Fig. 6.** Josh Hite, *Material Affinities*, 2008, digital photo.



In *“The Body as an Everyday Material in the 1960s: Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton”* S. Elise Archias examines the body as the material of “everydayness” in the works of Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton. Rainer and Paxton instructed actors to perform quotidian activities with a neutral facial expression. Archias argues that it is through this neutralization of the face, in tandem with the repetition of the actors’ actions, that the body’s quality as a subject or object is obscured. In other words, the actor is no longer recognized as a person per se but rather as a body executing automated tasks. Archias argues that passivity – the condition of the body moving without response or resistance – constitutes the materiality of everydayness for Rainer and Paxton.

Mike Borkent’s paper *“The Materiality of Cognition: Concrete Poetry and the Embodied Mind”* explores the aesthetic qualities of the concrete poetry of Canadian poet bpNichol. Borkent argues that this artist’s concrete poems synthesize linguistic and visual modes of signification through embodied notions of materiality, iconicity, and performativity. Borkent’s detailed theoretical framework and formal analysis elucidate key implications of a materiality-based methodology. One such implication is the manner in which materiality has been used to access the experience of a pre-linguistic or pre-reflective encounter. By emphasizing the phenomenological body and embodiment in his analysis, Borkent develops his theme of synthesis in the connectivity of the mind and body. This theoretical move is then directed against the privileging of language over imagery in concrete poetry. Thus, materiality is a potent framework through which to access the more profoundly radical actions of this avant-garde poet and the mechanisms of this particular art form.

Taisuke Edamura’s *“Vitreous Demeanor and Gerhard Richter’s Moving Glass”* explores Gerard Richter’s work as a “defiant some-thing” that cannot be described as a pictorial window or a sculptural object. In past analyses, Richter’s rotating glass works have been discursively trajected into the discussion of representational painting. Under this framework, the works are only valued as a critique of conventional picture-making and exhibition practice. Alternatively, Edamura emphasizes that the mobility and reflective surface of Richter’s work generate countless images and vantage points. The rotating glass planes resist the fixed gaze of the viewer and in some instances may even return the gaze. As a result, the work and the viewer-participant (who may be reflected on its surface) form an afterimage. In this sense, Edamura’s paper points to the excess of visibility in the very definition of the afterimage; that is, the persistence of vision itself.

Adrienne Fast’s *“(En)counter the White Cube: Regimes and Experiences of Viewing at the Vancouver Art Gallery”* analyzes how two distinct spaces in today’s modern art gallery – the subterranean stor-

age, and the highly visible display areas – solicit diverse relationships with art and art objects. Fast contrasts the Vancouver Art Gallery’s workspaces in the basement with exhibition galleries dedicated to art objects’ reified contemplation. Fast analyzes the capacity of our exterior environment and objects in order to determine how human behaviour is pertinent to investigations of materiality. Fast uncovers how each space stimulates different levels of attentiveness to the material aspects of the art object. This methodology enables Fast to single out the mechanisms by which the white cube serves as a space to discipline and socialize the viewer. The optical strategies of the display gallery ensure an element of mystery that elicits and reinscribes the viewer’s detached relationship with the art on display. By contrast, Fast explores the overlooked daily experiences of the VAG staff within the highly dynamic spaces dedicated to art storage, processing and treatment. The unique bodily awareness and movement of bodies through these disordered underground spaces encourage an intimate engagement with art objects. Space – in its built form and signification, in its visual and corporeal effects on human agents, and in this case the gallery visitor and the gallery staff – ensures normative behaviour towards the objects on display and the objects being processed.

*“In Rows”*, a site-specific digital film projection on wood panel by media artist Josh Hite, was commissioned specifically for the symposium. Hite projected his film on a dividing panel, at the back of the auditorium-style classroom, behind the uppermost row of desk chairs. The projection, which ran throughout the course of the two day symposium, depicted a young male, presumably a student, seated in a compact desk chair typical of a traditional lecture hall. His movements – slight stretching, rocking, wriggling – are limited by the restraint of his chair. The student’s body – torso, arms, and legs – trussed by the chair – tightly fill the frame. The cropping renders the student headless, and thus faceless, thereby assuring his anonymity. The moving body, lacking a face, also forces a somatic rather than incorporeal identification of the viewer with the image. The modern-day compact chair with tablet arm, and its inescapable invitation to fidget, emerges as the icon of bodily discomfort, a consequence of space-saving classroom design. *“In Rows”* considers the theme of materiality through its inquiry into surface and objecthood. Hite investigates the form- iconicity of the classroom chair as well as the porous nature of digital projection in a setting where content blends into context.

Ray Hsu and Brian Ee’s presentation during the symposium, *“Making Restitution Matter: Engaged Arts, Public Collaboration, and the Matter of Social Relations,”* conveyed their experience with at-risk communities and collaboration between academic and non-academic spheres. The final written piece that was produced for *WRECK* brings together the experiences of individuals involved in a UBC Reading

Week Project at a restitution-based elementary school. This piece offers the opportunity to see the practical realization of philosophical issues that are inherent in theories of materiality. A restitution-based philosophy of pedagogy actualizes the value of all human subjects, and reorients the more traditionally negative approach to seemingly difficult students: the hierarchical dualism of teacher and student are reconceived; difference is marked less by opposition than by connectivity; rather than being directed by an external authority and distanced from the whole, students are made responsible and accountable to the integrated community of individuals. Thus, the sensitivity to the intimate, fraught, and reciprocal, nature of relationships offers a potential praxis for childhood education. Moreover, such a paradigm inevitably transforms the teachers, families, and now the UBC students, who participate within that system and its values.