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# PHENOMENOLOGY OF MATERIAL WITHIN ARTISTIC PRACTICE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper will emulate the position of material within the compound of artistic practice, or refereed here within the practice of modern and contemporary art such as painting, sculpture, art installation. Objectively frame within a phenomenological perspective the discussion will show how domestically materials are understood and engage within and from an array of understandings that does not establish its location of it being just for the sake of usability or *mean to an end*, but that of dynamic and indebted to other entities which becomes an actor that institute meaning. As this is a conceptual paper the reading from such perspective will be interpretative where examples are taken and cross referred in connection towards the subject discuss. Such understanding is significant towards opening a way within the understanding itself that departs from a subscription that perceived material as being passive actor in the scheme of artistic practices. With such insight within this inquiry future set of engagement, be it conceptually or even practical, can be further develop by future art researchers or practitioners towards the question concerning material that goes beyond its mere usability understanding.

## Key Words

Material, Phenomenology, Poetic, Poiesis

## INTRODUCTION

Every material features a dynamic existence, a quality, and ability for transformation that modifies it to be considered *alive* even if it used to be a part from something living (Andrews, 1988, p. 1). Take a part of a tree, a piece of wood, and there can be changes and modification made on it by bending, cutting, splicing in two or burning it, compress it so that the wood will look different than what it was. Giving it a totally different look and changing it into a different form that does not resemble its initial form. Man-made materials also can be changed its character and structure to something new where materials like (synthetic) polymers, for example plastic bottles and plastic containers, can look new and changed when they react to fire and mixed with other materials or chemicals. Thus such change in man-made material also can be considered living due to such instance. From a scientific viewpoint, material 'starts at the smallest length scale, and works its way up from there' (Howes & Laughlin, 2012, p. 10). Within such reductionist notion, it is scientifically understood that all matter consist of atoms. This is mostly rather different for *material practitioners*, such as technologists and industrialists (Howes & Laughlin, 2012, p. 14). From their perception, materials are conditioned towards an understanding of 'substances that will be further processed' as such 'points to the forces of production at the time' (Lange-Berndt, 2015, p. 12). This condition is of course somewhat engaged differently and in a multitude of conditions, acts and meanings in the artistic practise. Through the visual artistic engagement, such as installation, painting and sculpture, the concern with material is motivated more in the direction of sensorial, aesthetic and perception (Howes & Laughlin, 2012, p. 14). Just like the material scientist who is motivated by a deep desire in learning the fundamental properties of materials the artist is also experiencing the same enthusiasm and inquisitiveness towards it. An artist's engagement with material can be of raw, irrational, experiential by entering

unexplored territories that are both incomprehensible and wondrous that in turn will imply new meanings.

### **MATERIAL IN THE ARTISTIC PRACTISE**

While natural science is predisposed towards understanding and discovering its 'truth claims' (Bolt, 2011, p. 114) of phenomena based on observable, empirical and verifiable evidence, where 'truth is seen as correspondence' (Bolt, 2011, p. 114), artistic journey through material is varied in its passageways and sometimes can glide towards poetical gesture. Such as the *stones* in Sunaryo's *Wok Batu* (See Figure 1) installation, where Sugiharto wrote 'in their silence, stones contains a story of endless length, that of the mystery of life' (2015, p. 20). Also poetical, even if materials are work through in an arrangement between art and science itself, as in the work of Theo Jansen's *Strandbeest* and Mel Chin's *Revival field* (See Figure 1).

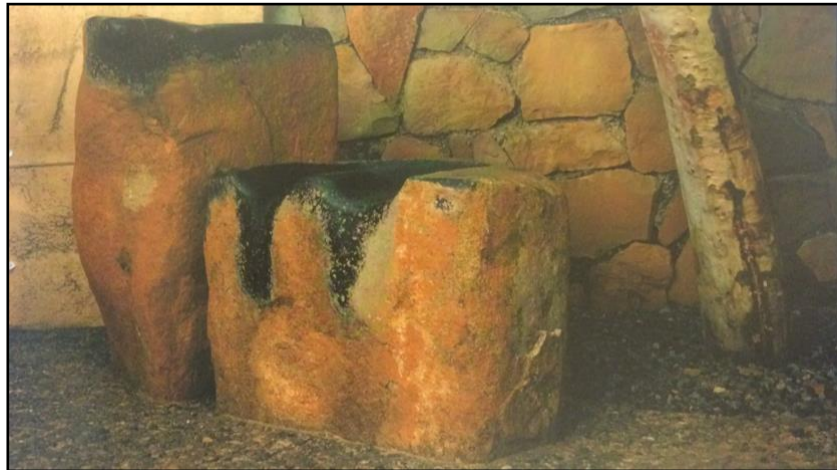


Figure 1. One of the many stone works from the *Wak batu* garden installation piece (Selasar Sunaryo, 2015, p. 105)

In Mel Chin's *Revival field*, he sees his plant as having a poetic nature that works as a 'sculpture of carving away' ("Mel Chin: Revival Field," n.d, para. 1). In his poetical idea *plant* or his *hyperaccumulation* plants becomes his sculpture material that can be used pragmatically to *carve* away toxic metal from heavy metal polluted ground.



Figure 2. *Revival Field* (Mel Chin, 1991, "Mel Chin")

Materials also are contextualised towards celebrating ordinariness and also peculiar condition of common material such as in the works of Martin Creed's *Work No 79* (See *Figure 1.4*), or defining structural meanings, be it by 'questioning, describing and defining itself' (Kosuth, 1992, p. 66). Materials are also used as a kind of on-going realist correlation 'of human beings to objects and objects to objects in relation to human beings' (Weiner in Goldstein, 2007, p. 103) and also representatively appropriate for subliminal messages, challenging political and social system and authorship, such as in the work of Santiago Sierra's *House in mud* (See *Figure 3*) he had used mud and blatantly installed it at the Kestnergesellschaft, Hannover, Germany.



*Figure 3. Work No 79. Blu-tack on wall (Creed, 1993, p. 79)*



*Figure 3. House in mud. Mud installed in a gallery (Sierra, 2005, p. 494)*

### **MATERIAL FROM A PHENOMENOLOGY PERSPECTIVE**

In the being of art in artistic practice of a phenomenological framing, relationship with material is understood within an engagement with that of the artist and other elements which thus *bringing-forth (poietical revealing) the truth* in the object into being in practice, or in its Heideggerian concept as the 'happening of truth' (Young, 2001, p. 17). Here unlike poietical revealing, Martin Heidegger distinguished *enframing revealing (Gestell)* as a form of being which 'concern an ordering and mastery over *what-is*' (Bolt, 2011, p. 80) which is in relative to this is present in the technological

understanding of material in the mass manufacturing production where the concern in ‘unlocking, transforming, storing, distributing, and switching’ (Heidegger, 1955/1977, p. 16). Such strict understanding of material is *mastered* by human being alone for his or her own advantage. Rather, when understanding phenomenologically, at the heart of most artistic practices the tendency with material is of *poietical revealing*. Poietical revealing as explained by Barbara Bolt from her reading of Heidegger's work contains the ‘openness before *what-is*’ (p. 80) and not ‘an ordering and mastery over *what-is*’ (p. 80) by the artist. Laid differently, it is the openness in the direction of an object, a phenomenon, beings potentiality to unconcealed itself as they are engage in a state of *inter-dependentness* between human and non-human entities in a pre-reflective, lived-world experience. It is ‘a mode of being’s coming to presence’ which this sort of bringing-forth is understood and termed by Heidegger as *techne*, which is ‘bringing-forth as revealing’ (Bolt, 2011, p. 80). Over historical account, there have been a lot of novelties in this condition of *poietical revealing* (opening up or unveiling) towards the being of material, which can be found in certain important event such as the *paint drip* from Pollock’s paintings or in the *accidental crack glass* of Marcel Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (See Figure 4). In such condition ‘being is more a becoming than any particular way of being’ (Wentworth, 2004, p. 38).

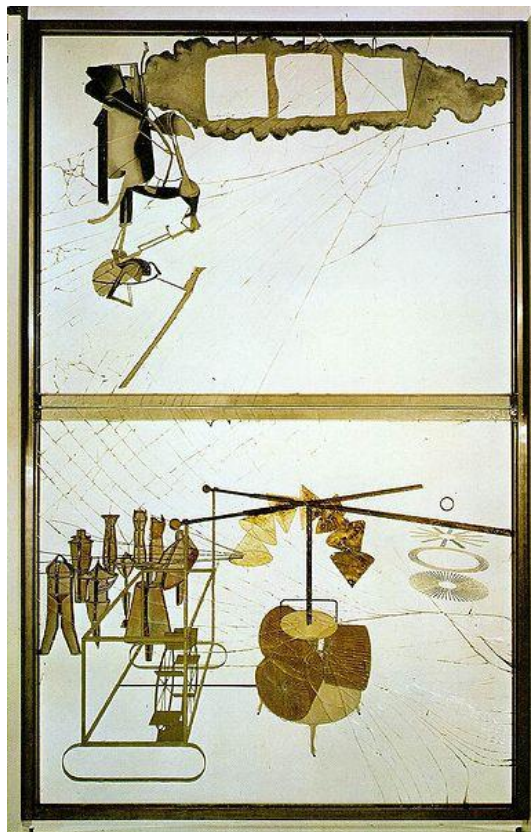


Figure 4. The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (the large glass). Mixed media (Duchamp, 1915-23, “DADA companion”)

Engaging and working In the contemporary art world involves with in any form of materials in art making, be it oil paint (Thomas Nozkowski, Gerhard Richter, Picasso), enamel for painting (Dan Collen), bitumen (Hamir Soib, Jailani Abu Hassan), corten steel (Richard Serra), wood (Rudy Hendriatno, Martin Puryear) and chocolate (Janine Antoni) for sculpture, soil, leaves, rocks (Andy Goldsworthy, Richard Long) felt and fat (Joseph Beuys) for installation or cooked rice, Thai vegetable curry (Rirkrit Tiravanija) (See Figure 5) for performance are ‘performatively’ (Loxley, Haseman, 2007, Bolt, 2008, 2015) handle in a duet of discovery which is concealment and unconcealment of the

phenomenon happened dynamically and meaningfully inside the artist's own practice- but never alone or with in his/her own self as he/she is already indebted to other entities in practice. As Rirkrit himself could not raise up into present his cooking piece without the appreciation of the vegetable, the Thai source and the utensil for the work.



Figure 5. Untitled. Cooked rice, Thai vegetable curry (Rirkrit Tiravanija, 1992, "Becky Bendy Legs")



Figure 6. Black Flakes. Mixed media (*Schwarze Flocken*), (Kiefer, 2006, "Art fund")

In Anselm Kiefer's works for example (See Figure 6), Matthew Biro (1998) explained that Kiefer engagement along with his materials as 'releas(ing) the transformative potential within the materials upon which he works' (p. 209), that summarizes Biro's notion that Bolt define it as a 'poetic revealing' (Bolt, 2011, p. 85). Although working in a quasi-industrial massive scale building equip with his very own operational team, Kiefer's art practice in actual fact does not obey within any typical industrial operational, but rather more like that of 'an alchemist engaged in a process of transformation' (Bolt, 2004, p. 58). Even in the works by Jeff Koon (See Figure 7) and also in Donald Judd, where the material used end up looking manufactured-control like, phenomenologically the material are still handled in a poetic sense because of one major principle, which is at the heart of all these artistic engagements with any materials as there is a deep investment in the practice of knowing the materials over the work itself. This is so by going through the unknown through the process of the becoming of the art object. Crowell explained that Judd's work is a 'way of *doing* phenomenology, of making the transition from naive to transcendental visual experience' (2011, p. 40-41). As for Koon, the engaging with stainless steel was something that 'originally recognised as a modest material' ("The exquisite process of Jeff Koons," 2015, para. 8) but through the journey of

making the work, the material *showed* its potentiality and Koon realised that the material had become ‘the vehicle for the transformation of value’ (“The exquisite process of Jeff Koons,” 2015, para. 8).



Figure 7. Balloon dog. Aluminum & industrial glossy paint (Koon, 1994-2000, “art21”)



Figure 8. Milkstone, Marble and milk (Wolfgang Laib, 1975, “studyblue”)

Wolfgang Laib as a German artist is well known for his works with pollen. The forms of his works are pure minimalist but the significance is pushed towards Eastern philosophies. One of his most renowned and first unconventional work is his *Milkstone*, 1975 (See Figure 8). The work consists of a rectangular slab of white marble and milk. The top surface was made to have a slight and almost unnoticeable depression where the milk is poured, in which gives it an illusion of a solid object. Even though both materials are seen to be natural the works reside as a permanent but also time-based, bodily existing together. As the marble sits boldly on top of the gallery floor, it is discreet and emotionless. On the other hand, the milk is sensitive-like, needs attention when it has to be refilled continuously as it changes due to continuous evaporation. As these materials’ properties are being different, it produces a kind of poetic gesture towards the work, as it is being both alive and dead at the same time.



Figure 9. Horse chestnut tree, Horse chestnut leaves (Goldsworthy, 1986, "Andy Goldsworthy Digital Catalogue")

Artist Andy Goldsworthy (See Figure 9) is well-known for his works with natural materials. Working with such material is his personal attempt to *know* them through handling. This sort of approach opens up to a ways of understanding and seeing towards the work and where the mastery of the artist is not the paramount. His concern was very much in the process of making as much as wanting to see them as a finished artwork. As he himself had explained below,

'When I'm working with materials it's not just the leaf or the stone, it's the processes that are behind them that are important. That's what I'm trying to understand, not a single isolated object but nature as a whole' (as cited in Hurley, 2003, para. 4).

Despite the fact in some of his work materials are formed and *glued* together to create a fully formed sculpture; Goldsworthy does not use any manmade material such as industrial glue. Instead he used ropes as he prefers to explore the bonding and tensions that occur in nature. For him the usage of such manmade material in a natural environment such as at a river, forest will be like abandoning 'the joy of discovering how materials join together by their own nature' ("Nature as Material," n.d, para. 12). Working with a material such as rocks also sees how it has given him awareness to his artistic involvement with the material. Such insight could not be possible through a theoretical understanding alone, as experiencing things first hand in this world creates its own way of seeing. Heidegger describes this condition of just having theoretical knowing as 'our just-having-it-before-us lies before us *as a failure to understand it any more*' (Heidegger, 1926/1962, p. 190). Goldsworthy's involvement through natural material not only opens up his understanding towards his own work, but also has unveiled him on how material such rocks have a *world-disclosing* possibility, or as how in a extensive statement he described,

'a rock is not independent of its surroundings. The way it sits tells how it came to be there. The energy and space around a rock are as important as the energy and space within. The weather - rain, sun, snow, hail, mist, calm - is that external space made visible. When I touch a rock, I am touching and working the space around it. In an effort to understand why that rock is there and where it is going, I do not take it away from the area in which I found it' ("Nature as Material," n.d, para. 3).

Here in 'doing something' (Bolt, 2011, p. 23) or in Goldsworthy's context, involvement with rocks signifies a critical transformation in his thinking about the concept of *understanding* his work. It is through his corporeality (lived body, hands, eyes, body gestures) on dealing with rocks in its environment, that the material unconcealed its reality towards the artist, thus forging a world that has become more significant to him. The importance of his works is his constant commitment with materials in a lived experience.

## CONCLUSION

In the condition where understanding of means to end that dominates our perception in artistic practices, the tendency of the involvement with materials is instrumental. Within this frame of thinking, the artist is understood in exercising mastery over his materials in the process of working. Through this, the artist positioned himself reasonable as the *cause* of which his artwork comes into presence. Although, this is a common idea amongst artists and other performers in the art world; yet this kind of rigid thinking is not something conclusive, but more of a particular way in understanding the world. By looking through the lens of phenomenology, material is not seen as a mean to an end, which in such framing it become the background that constitute the form for the work of art, stripping away from its significant existence. Material is alive as something that becomes an agency of meaning or revealing its truth. Through the examples given, the artist veritably does not work alone or become the sole reason of the work of art coming into existence. Here, material is not instrumental but as a entity that the artist is indebted to as much as how the material is indebted to the artist and other the actors or entities like the tools and surface. Materials become a poetical revealing through the artist's creative engagement with them that within the course of such dealing where it's transformative potential is made known. In working with their materials, artist like Goldsworthy, Laib, Kiefer and Koon tries to poetically *know* their materials in handling. Within a phenomenological understanding, material is again look upon with wonder through the experience of the conscious artist.

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