

In honour of St Luke: Materiality in art

As the proto artist of the Christian tradition and patron of visual art St Luke has been associated with the transformation of base matter, pigment as mud, into an object of spiritual power or an object that activates intensely felt personal and cultural experiences of the world. A number of icons in northern Italy were still the focus of pilgrimages in the 15th and 16th centuries because of the supposed mystical authorship of St Luke. While you could limit your understanding of this effect to the production of an image of the spiritual I suggest that there is another very significant level working behind or before the image. It is the quality that lies before the image that I am mostly concerned with here. As Wittgenstein noted in his conversations on aesthetics there can be two equally recognisable images of the same thing one of which moves us and the other leaves us cold. Hence it is something not about the image that is at stake but about the way it is done. I would go further than Wittgenstein to look for qualities of object, material and process of making that carries this extra something.



Francis Bacon Head II 1949

Francis Bacon always claimed when explaining his art to David Sylvester that he wanted to find a way to make the materials he used convey the sensation of the thing directly onto the nervous system, short circuiting reading and interpretation. He may have pulled this off once or twice especially in **Head II 1949**. The idea is a potent one and a good target to have for the artist even if he often fell short of this synchronicity of material means and message. Bacon courted calculated accidents as a way of averting the literal gaze bringing attention back to the paint or matter and the hand of the artist. Sometimes he used materials other than paint and brushes and relied very heavily on film and the still photograph particularly old and battered ones that have already acquired incidental change or damage that he could capture in his compositions.

Marcel Duchamp pioneered the exploitation of chance and rejected the supposedly neutral medium of paint as a means of reproducing a likeness of something in favour of applying materials by processes that have concrete associations or affiliations with the subject of the work. While this seems a long way from medieval iconography the physical attributes of an icon could sometimes register more powerfully as a reliquary or evidence of mystical intervention (St Luke) than the image itself. The occasional inclusion into such icons of purported relics meant that the icon as an object took on a metonymic relation to the subject rather than a purely illustrational one. In such a

case it is the icon as relic or material connection to the spiritual that gives it power not the image itself.

If we go to pre-Christian or pre-historic objects we find magical and practical applications of the same logic. My favourite example is a seal bone carved as a spear head in the shape of a seal and used for harpooning seals. It brings a mystical connection between the hunter and the quarry but also honours the life of the hunted suggesting a cycle of renewal.



Bamana Boli figure from Mali A figure made in West Africa out of clay blood and hair does not need to be a good likeness, its power is clearly in the attributes of the materials and their sympathetic associations and agency.



Mexican war era locket Daguerreotype with hair

In the 19th century the popular practice of putting fragments of fabric and locks of hair into Daguerreotype frames suggests a lingering attachment to things that can evoke embodied memory or bring the user closer to the subject than an image alone. Many of us have fragments of our past in our wallets or in a box in a draw, a lock of hair from a loved one or a passport photo creased and carrying the traces of a past. These objects have a primitive hold on us. For Picasso to invoke similar strategies in



‘**Still life with chair caning**’ 1912 and for Duchamp to describe the lurking bachelors by the temporal capture of dust to describe filters or sieves in ‘**The Large Glass**’ 1915-1923 was not such a big step after all.

Powerful responses to objects that seem to transcend iconography occurred during the Reformation. Ostensibly images were rejected on ideological grounds, however the extraordinary response of some congregations to representations of the body suggest something more visceral. Figures of the virgin were violently attacked sometimes

having their eyes poked out in savage mutilations that had little to do with destroying the sculpture. In some cases sculptures were smeared with excrement or bulls blood which suggests very primal responses as if to living entities. Luther himself urged moderation saying these are *only* images they are not capable of being agents of evil, however his colleague Andreas Kartlstadt retorted that the objects clearly had a much more powerful effect on the imagination of his flock than mere images. The beholder had completed a transformation beyond the capacity or intention of the maker.

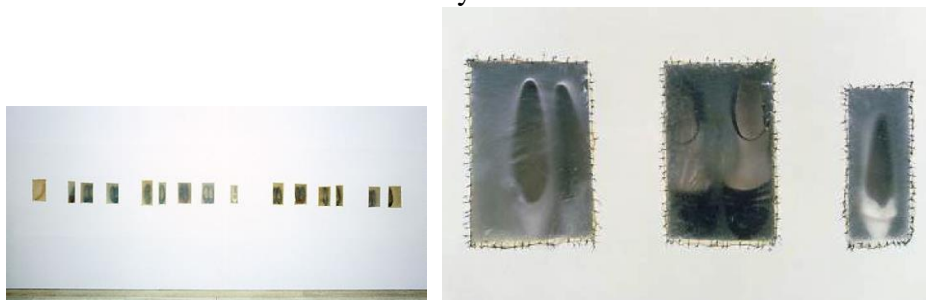
By making reason central to the formation of our identity and our world view 'Discourse on the Method' 1637 Descartes was following in a tradition embraced by Asian Mystics and Plato who saw the senses as the basest form of knowing. However our bodies and the world they inhabit are intimately connected from conception to death and much of what we know or remember is inscribed in the body and by extension into the world it has experienced. Memories stimulated by material traces have a visceral effect tantamount to reliving the moment unlike memories captured in words. Understanding how objects can recreate sensations and recall otherwise misplaced experiences may trace a connection between the medieval relic and more recent use of objects that are both *of* the world *and* representations of it. Eg. **Picasso 'Still life with chair caning'** - Here a piece of rope is a picture frame, an image of a rope, an actual rope, an image of a carved simulation of a rope and a drawing of a table top seen in perspective. This strategy is more explicitly aimed at an affective response in Christian Boltanski's installations combining photos with reliquaries such as this group including *Dog in a street*.



Christian Boltanski Install

Doris Salcedo's 'Atrabillarios'

Employs shoes belonging to those who have "disappeared" placed in niches like ex-votos and covered in animal membranes. This work is not just a memorial it is also a demonstration of embodied memory



Gregor Schneider is one of the most striking exponents of art that works with the real world as a medium. He presents or alters it in ways that impact strongly on our thinking and reveals things about the way we remember and experience space. He has quarried and reconstructed walls and floors in his father's house so that it has become riddled by **unknowable voids** within an ostensibly normal domestic setting. In 2001 he reconstructed this house, **Dead house Ur**, in the German pavilion in Venice to win the prestigious Lion d'or award. The effect was to create a concrete manifestation of misremembered spaces of childhood where nothing quite connects properly. In one room access to the next level is only possible by crawling under a **sink unit**. These dislocations are the more remarkable because of the extraordinary authenticity he has paid to **every detail of its facture**. You become intensely aware of these details such as the period wall paper, door fittings, light switches, mouldings etc.



In 2004 in East London he converted two terrace houses into an extraordinary site for remembering and misremembering.

Gregor Schneider family Artangel London 2004.

The conditions of viewing were strictly managed and there was no advance publicity to explain what would be in store for the visitor. Bookings were taken for two people at a time for a visit of 20 minutes. At a designated time visitors arrived at the Artangel shopfront that had been established for the event in Whitechapel. There one key was given to each of the two visitors, one opened number 14 the other number 16 in a nearby terrace of worker's cottages. You were asked to go into your respective houses for no more than 7/8 minutes then to come outside and swap keys for the second half of the visit. You were not allowed to return to the first house after the visit and you were not allowed to take anything eg camera, bags or umbrella with you on the visit.

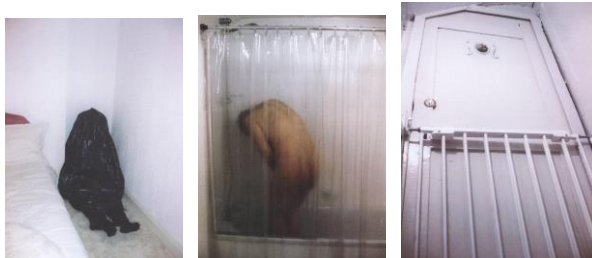


On entering number 14 I was struck with the claustrophobic scale of the terrace, no doubt it was always a small poky place but I felt sure Schneider had made it all the more so by his décor and probably minor modifications to ceiling heights and even walls. The small living room or parlour on the ground floor was overheated and fuggy but otherwise very ordinary except for a stack of cakes on the floor and an overfull ashtray. The house felt occupied and I began to feel uncomfortably like an intruder.



The next room I entered was the kitchen. It was a shock to find a woman standing at the sink doing the dishes. She was busily clattering the plates in the sink while a pile of dirty plates stood on her left and the clean dishes were on the draining board to her right. I stayed a few moments to see if anything else would happen but she just kept at her activity – in hind sight I recall that she did not seem to be making any progress simply repeating the same actions, stuck in a short time loop. The atmosphere was very disturbing. I already felt like an intruder, and of course a voyeur but at the same time being ignored was also very strange

I then made my way upstairs. I tried various cupboard doors as well as some room doors that remained locked. I felt compelled to try to open them in case they were an important part of the house even though the door was a bit stiff. On the other hand you do not want to force something that is intended to remain closed. This anxiety was surely also part of the plan. In the bedroom I actually broke the handle off the wardrobe door trying to open it and spent a few moments trying to get it back on. Then I turned round to see a figure propped in a corner with a black plastic bag over its torso, just the legs and black stockinged feet sticking out. The next room turned out to be the bathroom. The shower was running and behind the shower curtain there was a naked male figure facing away from me while masturbating in the stream of steamy water.



The stairs to the attic were blocked off with a baby gate and the door firmly locked. The cupboard on the stairs was also jammed shut at the top left corner I tried for a few moments to open it as it did not seem locked as such but it would not budge. At this point I realised my time must be up and went back out onto the street just stopping to

see if the washer in the kitchen was still at it- she was and no further advanced with her task than before.

Outside I met my co-visitor and we exchanged keys without speaking. Entering the second hallway was unnerving since it was not only very similar to the first one but as far as I could see identical in every detail! I almost expected it to mirror the first room but in fact it was an identical reproduction down to the last detail. I took the rooms in the same order; the pile of cakes was there exactly the same as before. In the kitchen I had the greatest shock because the same woman was going through the exact same actions at the sink. I recalled the stain on the top dish waiting to be washed; the body language was exactly the same - it was apparently the same room, same woman. But of course it could not be; my co-visitor must by now be in the first room.

This unhooking of time not to mention space was uncanny! I was struck by the fact that I was remembering details from the first house that I could not have recalled if they were not re-presented to me. This confirmed for me that we are able to recognise experiences that are not consciously recalled until the world unlocks the memory by repetition. I take this as empirical confirmation if it be needed of the importance of externally constituted memory.

This time in the bedroom I saw the foot of the small figure in the plastic bag twitch a few times so it was a real figure. The cupboard room on the stairs was identical the same red paint the same jammed door at the top edge. The precision of the reproduction was still unnerving and challenged both memory and psychological orientation. The same man was masturbating with exactly the same body language in the showerI left only 20 minutes had elapsed.



As an example of conceptual art that transforms our experience of space at the same time making us aware of the tricks of memory this was exemplary. It caused me to rethink how we see and remember the world about us. This complex installation in two identical houses required a very particular form of engagement on the part of visitors who consequently experienced temporary destabilisation of memory and spatial disorientation. This is a case of conceptual art making us look at ourselves looking, to paraphrase Ian Burn. When a modified object (a house) alters our understanding of how we occupy and experience space a form of transformation from matter to consciousness has occurred that is very much in the tradition of St Luke. External form has directly reconfigured our internal compass, undercutting certainty and liberating affective and empathetic responses. We are not seeing a house we are seeing our consciousness grapple with the world almost as if we were a disembodied observer.