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*Interrogating Time and Meaning:
Aligning Art Criticism,
Conservation, Cultural Context
and Materiality*

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ABSTRACT

Art criticism relies on having access to an art history that has been rigorously assessed and contested through the advancement of disciplinary knowledge. As examples of recent art criticism have indicated, however, critics flounder when called to assess art that signifies important knowledge and aesthetics from areas beyond their own epistemological heritage. This is particularly the case with Australian Aboriginal art, where there are significant examples of criticism that do not engage with either the cultural context of the aesthetic values of the work, do not identify gaps in the episteme of the criticism, but yet which is stridently judgemental. In art conservation, where materiality (or lack

of) defines the point of entry to all questions, verification and evidence-based decision-making are essential to professional praxis—but developing these tools requires effective mechanisms for cross-cultural participation and collaboration. Using materiality as both the framework and point of departure from which to develop more rigorous approaches to artistic and aesthetic inquiry, this paper examines how such a focus on materials can help to provide proper contextualisation of cultural exigencies and values, and thereby build formal and structural approaches to address gaps in critical commentary.

KEY WORDS

Art conservation, cultural materials conservation, Australian Aboriginal art, art criticism, participatory inquiry, cross-cultural collaboration, materialism.

INTRODUCTION

It is because, as Karen Barad demonstrated, '[l]anguage has been granted too much power' (2003, p. 801) that I began this paper in a flurry of indignation. The Australian survey show, under-burdened with the title *Australia*, which opened in London in September 2013 had provoked criticism that was petty and quarrelsome, but also some that was vitriolic—and this was particularly the case with commentary relating to the Aboriginal art on show. Writing on the Aboriginal artwork (and the artists) represented in the exhibition The *Sunday Times* critic Waldemar Januszczak claimed:

Having seen fragments of their ancient art in situ—carved onto rock faces, scratched into lofty overhangs—I know them to be the creators of a mighty artistic tradition ...Aborigine art, in situ,...is an art of tremendous power and pertinence. Exactly what the show needs. Exactly what it doesn't get. (Januszczak, 2013, n.p.)

He continued by disparaging not only the expertise of the artists, but their motivation:

Instead, there are dull canvas approximations, knocked out in reduced dimensions, by a host of repetitive Aborigine artists making a buck. Out of a tremendous indigenous tradition, fired and inspired by an enormous natural landscape, the Australia art world has managed to create what amounts to a market in decorative rugs... in most cases the great art of the Aborigines has been turned into tourist tat. Only Clifford Possum

Tjapaltjarri, in a dense and undulating landscape of cosmic dots called Warlugulong, successfully evokes the vast rhythms of the outback. (Januszczak, 2013, n.p.)

Brian Sewell, of the *Evening Standard*, was even more contemptuous; fancifully claiming an Indigenous history of isolation and epistemological stasis and packaging his criticisms within a nineteenth-century Tyloresque or Fraserian primitivism:

No one realised that Englishmen were the first humans to tread on this vast island since the Aborigines had arrived (whence? I wonder) some 50,000 years before. No one was scientifically curious enough to see that these indigenous people offered in their unblemished Stone Age state an unparalleled opportunity for insights into the origins of man as a mystical, myth-making, music-making, artefact-decorating animal. They discovered congregations of people isolated from each other in this vast and inhospitable land... all caught in a time-warp of pre-history that ante-dated Genesis, and yet this extraordinary, amazing, wonderful resource of human archaeology they wantonly destroyed. (Sewell, 2013, n.p.)

He then presented a blistering attack of the cultural authority and the authenticity of the Aboriginal artists, wishing to see, rather than contemporary Aboriginal art, more 'authentic' 'pre-colonial Aboriginal artefacts', which he likened to archaeological remains from the Ice Age:

For these examples of contemporary aboriginal work are so obviously the stale rejiggings of a half-remembered heritage wrecked by the European alcohol, religion and servitude that have rendered purposeless all relics of their ancient and mysterious past... The black exploits the white's obsession with conspicuous display and plays on the corporate guilt that he has now been taught to feel for the ethnic cleansing of the 19th century—a small revenge for the devastation of his culture—but the Aborigine offers only a reinvented past, his adoption of 'whitefella' materials and, occasionally, 'whitefella' ideas (Jackson Pollock must surely lie behind the longest of these canvases) undoing his 'blackfella' integrity... I can see the point of an exhibition of pre-colonial Aboriginal artefacts, for it might be as provocative and illuminating as the recent investigation of the Ice Age at the British Museum (how about a show comparing them with the survivals from the earliest sites of civilisation in the Americas, Africa and Asia?). (Sewell, 2013, n.p.)

Unfortunately repetition extends the passage of these words through the world, but it is worth identifying the reversion to, and reliance on nineteenth-century tropes that make it evident that in the theatre of taste in which these critical performances take place, there is a paucity of tools with which to engage in the deep, complex and rich ontology represented in these great works.

Arts commentator Melik Kaylan, writing on the exhibition of works from Papunya Tula, *Art of the Western Desert*, held in New York in 2009 took a similar but opposing position, celebrating the evidence of the 'primitive' in the contemporary, asking the reader to

[i]magine that you could travel back in time to meet a Stone Age hunter-gatherer, that you could hand him a paintbrush and ask him to paint something on a board or canvas—not warpaint on his body or daubings on a cave, but a proper picture, one that gave us a glimpse of his inner landscape and his aesthetic universe.... This is precisely what happened at Papunya in 1972 near the remote outpost of Alice Springs in the heart of the Australian outback. (Kaylan, 2009, n.p.)

The exhibition, he argued, enabled the viewer to look 'back at our species in a more primitive state' and offering 'a chance to enjoy a glimpse of how, eons ago, in an ancient landscape, our species was able to find patterns of beauty in nature' (Kaylan, 2009, n.p.).

The concern to find a suitable critical methodology on which to scaffold discussions of cultural and aesthetic values and artistic practice is unprocessed in the writings of these critics, who call on primitivism as a guiding episteme. Australian writer Nicholas Rothwell (2015) deals with this concern in an article entitled: 'Aboriginal art in decline as critics and judges hold back'. In it he seeks 'an index of quality' by which to assess Aboriginal art, and berates art critics for their disinclination to engage with Aboriginal art in ways that could be used to build a framework 'against which an artist's adherence to tradition or their originality and particular brilliance might be gauged.' Positing tradition as a binary to originality, and to the conjunction of originality and brilliance, is problematic, in part for the reasons identified in the criticisms above. Nevertheless, Rothwell's argument that there must be benchmarks for critical

judgment employed in discussion about art and artists is well-made. Without proper contextualisation, Rothwell concludes, the work is unavailable to engender useful debate and 'even a prominent work on high-profile exhibition hangs in a void, undifferentiated, uncharacterised, almost invisible'. The result is that the artist cannot receive relevant and well-constructed criticism, leading the artworld to 'A kind of wilful blindness [as] the inevitable result.' (Rothwell, 2015, n.p.)

Two writers have attempted to deal with this

...the artist cannot receive relevant and well-constructed criticism...

dilemma of 'undifferentiated, uncharacterised' invisibility by situating artistic production in historical and relational context to the artists and to specific artworks. Henry Skerritt (2012), writing on the Anmatyerre artist Josie Kunoth Petyarre, positions Petyarre within the genealogy of the great women artists to whom she is related, exploring her practice through a critical discussion of abstraction and figurative representation. In doing so he critiques concerns of authenticity, representation and contemporaneity that occupy Januszczak, Sewell and Kaylan. Quentin Sprague (2013) confronts the process of transactionality within Aboriginal art practice, explaining the role of the art centre manager, Tony Oliver, as both guide and student and describing the collaborative nature of Gija practice within the Jirawan

artists' cooperative. He rejects the description of the works that engaged both Oliver and Paddy Bedford or Oliver and Phyllis Thomas in their production as 'products of crosscultural collaboration', instead arguing that this 'proves that creativity will cut its own path regardless of the ideological barriers that so often surround cross-cultural engagements in Australia'. In both essays the artists are vindicated by their ability to both strengthen culturally embedded artmaking and drive innovation in their practice. But such arguments are useful for the work of a limited number of artists and continue to privilege a very twentieth-century Western notion of the importance of artistic innovation.

MATTER AS THE BASIS FOR PEDAGOGICAL CONTENT DEVELOPMENT

So the question remains, what kind of discourse is appropriate when a non-Aboriginal academic, such as myself, is seeking points of entry and reference into contemporary Aboriginal art? And what tools are there to support more than a visceral and vocal opposition to inadequate criticism? A key issue, obviously, is that there are two intellectual domains at play here: Australian Aboriginal ontology, located within and enabled by specific knowledge holders by narrative and performance and art practice; and the Western history of ideas, accessed through texts and enabled by specific forms of textual transmission. This difference is more than an issue of medium of transmission, but reflects deep differences in authority, knowledge production, cultural preservation and cultural iteration. It is therefore not a surprise that Aboriginal ontology

remained invisible in the reference points of critics in London and New York.

In discussing how to break through the borders set around particular discursive practices, and the discourses that arise as a result, Michel Foucault (1977, p. 35) argues:

The barrier imposed by omission was not added from the outside; it arises from the discursive practice in question, which gives it its law. Both the cause of the barrier and the means for its removal, this omission—also responsible for the obstacles that prevent returning to the act of initiation—can only be resolved by a return. In addition, it is always a return to a text itself, specifically to a primary and unadorned text with particular attention to those things registered in the interstices of the text, its gaps and absences. We return to those empty spaces...

Rothwell considers these empty spaces as a crisis in authenticity that requires, as a response, the development of more ‘formal, technical criticism’. He argues:

In the foundation times of the modern art trade ... great critical authority rested with connoisseurs of art history, figures such as Bernard Berenson, who provided attributions, separated the works of front-line artists from those of their followers and assistants, and spotted the forger’s telltale hand. They relied on technical and stylistic analysis, on their understanding of the flow of influences between schools and workshops and individuals, and on their concept of an artist’s thought-world.

Despite its shallow time horizon the Aboriginal art scene today faces much the same dilemmas. There is a slew of similar-seeming works by various hands, with a shared vocabulary of symbols. How to order them? The difficulties run very deep. (Rothwell, 2015, n.p.)

He further argues for a critical attitude that

...seeks to find out how it achieves its effect; that weighs the relationship between form, texture, shade and colour; that goes beyond merely reading symbols to sensing their tonality; that finds in pattern and rhythm a form of conceiving and ordering the world. (Rothwell, 2015, n.p.)

Terri Janke explicates this epistemological divide further by comparing how Western and Indigenous knowledge is held, developed and transmitted. In *Indigenous cultural and intellectual property: main issues for the Indigenous arts industry in 2006* she and co-author Robynne Quiggan articulate the ways in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous intellectual property is developed and managed by comparing ‘Non-Indigenous Laws’ with ‘Indigenous Customary Laws’ (Janke & Quiggan, 2006, p. 12). They point to the ‘holistic approach’ within Indigenous societies ‘by which all aspects of cultural heritage are inter-related’ (p. 13). Within this they identify that: Indigenous knowledge is communally owned, socially based and evolving continuously; many generations contribute to ongoing creation; attribution as a group for this contribution is a cultural right; there is a continuing obligation under Indigenous laws to maintain cultural integrity; and that often an individual or group acts

as custodian of an item of heritage, acting as a trustee with a binding role to pass on the knowledge in the best interests of the community.

It is little wonder that, at the other end of the globe, critics operating within the Western history of ideas, who write from the position of disciplinary, historical and cultural particularity feel emboldened to develop critical writing that is established on omission. There is, after all, very little likelihood that the senior Indigenous knowledge holders who can best refute their critical positions can engage in critical discourse; there is little informed writing that brings together the individual work with the history of ideas which nurtured its creation. And so the empty spaces remain, and the ontological and geo-political boundaries that surround them are unbridged and unassailable.

MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES AND THE EXPLORATION OF MEANING

In 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter' (2003, p. 822), Barad describes materiality as discursive, and addresses Foucault's plea for a return to the 'primary and unadorned text'. She argues:

Boundary-making practices, that is, discursive practices, are fully implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity through which phenomena come to matter. In other words, materiality is discursive (i.e., material phenomena are inseparable from the apparatuses of bodily production: matter emerges out of and includes as part of its being the ongoing reconfiguring of boundaries), just as

discursive practices are always already material (i.e., they are ongoing material (re)configurings of the world). Discursive practices and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to one another; rather, the material and the discursive are mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity.

On 17 September 2015 the exhibition OSF (*Ochre, Spinifex, Foil*) opened at Tin Shed Gallery at the University of Sydney. Auspiced by the Faculty of Architecture, Design and Planning, and curated by architect and architectural commentator, Gina Levenspiel, this exhibition contained a construction of different ochres, laid out in sequence to describe the journey of the knowledge of this material translated from its context on Aboriginal land, specifically Gija country around the community of Warmun. The content for this construction was informed by a five-year relationship between the Grimwade Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne and the Warmun Art Centre (Carrington et al., 2014), which had been developed through a slowly evolving but enthusiastic series of discussions and visits by Gija artists and conservation staff and students, to both Warmun and to the conservation centre. The ochres on exhibition had been chosen by the artists and supplied by the art centre. The simple construction, comprising various ochres laid out in petri dishes according to their interrelation with different forms of knowledge, was simple but visually stunning. It mapped the source of the ochres from their place on-country (physically and ontologically), through their use in Gija art production and, finally, to their role as material in scientific analysis to support

enquiries relating to art conservation, provenance, archaeology, and similar. In considering the value of this process Levenspiel wrote:

The scientific knowledge of Australian ochre—its pigment characterization, elemental and crystalline structure—enables conservators to treat Indigenous works of art. But they rely on context to justify any particular course of conservation action. Indigenous knowledge of ochre—its custodianship, manifestation on-country, collection and preparation for painting—informs its final cultural production as art. The ethical nexus for an exchange of knowledge between the two, can only take place from a position of equity around the medium. In other words, ochre is the medium which enables a knowledge exchange to occur. It is also the medium by which the authenticity of that knowledge exchange can be tested, validated, peer-reviewed and managed on both sides. (Levenspiel, 2015)

This is more than simply an analysis of a production cycle of harvest, use and knowledge—rather, Levenspiel’s statement articulates the way in which a materials-focused discourse generated from Aboriginal art production, and garnered from geopolitical, socio-economic and disciplinary discourse, can lead to ‘a return to a text itself’; to a replenishment of ‘those empty spaces’.

In fact a focus on ochre leads beyond the artwork to the genesis of the artwork in very real, practical, tangible, and yet metaphorical ways, to the country from which the artwork is generated. In so doing there emerge extraordinary opportunities for shared

learning. On one level this is straightforward. Ochre provides a visual and material focus, facilitating learning by marking a clearly visible, agreed point of departure—the redness of the iron oxide, the density of the white chalk, the hardness of the yellow rocks. But at the same time, these material considerations discussed by groups working across disciplinary and cultural divides enable penetrations into other knowledge streams: about geography (where the ochres come from), practice (what they are used for), technology (how they are modified for use), value (how they factor in trade), production (where, how and why are they used) and much more. These questions of context draw out further questions that begin to fill out a much broader epistemology: who is allowed to collect them (rights), who can use them (social constructions), who can talk about them (seniority and kinship), who chooses to use them and why (artistic practice and aesthetics) and much more. These enquiries in turn inform significant cross-cultural and social questions about land rights, aesthetic and pictorial values, the role of art centres, the contemporary art market, and much more. In this way these larger more complex concerns are properly grounded in a shared and well-considered discourse that has developed and evolved from agreed positions, and which can be critiqued by parties in different knowledge domains.

ECOLOGY AS AN EPISTEMIC SYSTEM SHAPER

The study of materials expands the potential for exploring issues through a broader ecology of knowledge; one that cuts across education and professional endeavors that aim to embed knowledge

and expertise firmly within disciplines. In fact the proposition can be strengthened, that in the study of ochre there is a clear demonstration of the requirement to explore broader epistemologies utilizing a broader ecology of knowledge. Strictly disciplinary inquiries have a clearly defined linearity, even those that are cross-cultural and where informants, communication and observation play such a major role (as is the case in anthropology), but their authority can be 'diffracted' in ways that illuminate 'the relation of the social and the scientific' and entail 'requisite questions of accountability' (Barad, 2003, p. 803).

In 1942, anthropologist Frederick G. G. Rose explored the range of pigments used on Groote Eylandt in Eastern Arnhem Land. In his paper 'Paintings of the Groote Eylandt Aborigines' he identified a range of ochres that provided the red, deep purple, and yellow pigments, the limestone that was used for white pigment, and the charcoal that was used for black. He examined the trade associated with pigments, distinguishing 'a pebble found near Caledon Bay [that] is traded across to Groote Eylandt'. The 'inside of this pebble' was 'black, and...also used for paint.' He also noted that the pebbles were 'carried in string dilly bags', which were 'not made on Groote Eylandt'. That a 'considerable number of these were 'found on Groote Eylandt', testified 'to a lively trade.' (Rose, 1942, p. 170)

Rose was also interested in the language used to categorize these objects, explaining that:

[T]he Aborigines can identify the various ochres etc., and can say from what locality they come. On being asked what a certain colour is, they reply not that it is 'red' or 'white', but give the name for the ochre, etc.; there can thus be many

names for the same colour. Some of the reds are indistinguishable to a white man but are easily identifiable to the Aborigine. (Rose, 1942, p. 170)

In 1949 Fred Gray (trepanger, adventurer and entrepreneur who had established and developed the Umbakumba Flying Boat Station on Groote Eylandt) provided the names of some of these pigments to Dr. Leonhard Adam at the University of Melbourne, identifying them specifically as 'Art materials used by Aborigines. Caledon Bay district of Arnhemland.' They included:

Murungun—A metallic looking reddish pigment.

Mikoe—A deep rust red.

Kulungurr—A bright yellow ochre.

Kapan—Similar to whiting (Gray, 1949)

Fifty-five years later in an essay in the catalogue of the Art Gallery of New South Wales' exhibition *Crossing Country: The Alchemy of Western Arnhem Land Art*, Luke Taylor considered the use of ochre in Western Arnhem Land. He recounted that at Kudjarnngal, the Mawurndjul family mine the brilliant white pigment called 'delek'. In this essay, Taylor explores the trade relationships and rights to pigment sites when he describes how 'delek' is:

[U]sed to paint the background figures in all their work. The delek is understood to be the faces of the serpent and therefore the transformed bodies of these other ancestral beings that she [Ngal'yod] swallowed. Delek is powerful in this sense as an ancestral essence, and this substance is used to create the dazzling reflective white that is at the

base of every image. The light that shines from these painting is another essence of Ngalyod's power. (Taylor, 2004, p. 125)

This cultural continuum links aesthetic choices, including choices of image and media, to cultural rights and obligations, with meaning embedded in issues of clan, country and ancestors:

[F]or Kuninkju the media of ochre and bark bespeaks their independence, their control over all stages of the production of their work, and their self-reliance on materials derived from their country. Indeed Ngalyod is responsible for the rains that make the sap run in the trees, which allows people to peel off the bark. The ochres, and particularly the prized delek pigment, are powerful ancestral substances in themselves, even before artists weave them into patterns of rarkk. (Taylor, 2004, p. 128)

In the same collection of essays the important Kuninkju artist, John Mawurndjul, describes the complex interrelationships and the profound connections that are part of his consideration in using ochre in his painting:

My father said to 'keep doing crosshatching and you will learn your own way.' Sometimes it makes me cry. I worry about crosshatching. I'm always thinking about it. And then I keep doing it...This painting is from my country, Milmilinkan... My father was always teaching me and I put his knowledge into my mind. And I know all about it now—all the djang places, large sites, small ones.

My djang... And I will always think about this. (Mawurndjul, 2004, p. 139)

As these examples demonstrate, the sharing of linguistic, historical and practical knowledge expands an understanding of the environment in which the use of ochre has been developed. In this way, shared points of reference provide glimpses into other epistemic references, not only to the knowledge that exists, but also in understanding how to conceive of epistemological gaps, of those places in the discourse where it may be relevant to know that knowledge may exist but not be available, or in fact may not be able to be shared. This type of conversation (and ochre represents only one such point of departure) reflects and references Barad's concept of "agential realism" as an epistemological-ontological-ethical framework that provides an understanding of the role of human and nonhuman, material and discursive, and natural and cultural factors in scientific and other social-material practices...'. (Barad, 2007, p. 26)

RELATIONALITY AS A PLATFORM FOR SHARING KNOWLEDGE

It is the ways in which discussions, focused on the materiality of ochre, build epistemic ecological systems that enable access to and understanding of the deep knowledge embedded in Aboriginal art. Commencing with small, thinly sliced pieces of information that may be neither deep nor comprehensive, relationality becomes a platform for not only sharing, but also expanding knowledge. Grounded on this relational platform the inviolable knowledge, described by

Marwurndjal and invisible to critics such as Sewell and Januszczak, becomes, if not accessible, at least existentially identifiable. More significantly, this knowledge is made identifiable within appropriately proscribed parameters as confidence is built in seeking and sharing information.

This relationality can be profoundly and deeply integrated in ways that reflect how complex knowledge is held in Aboriginal Australia. Nigel Thrift provides an insightful explanation of sensory relationality, and the impact and strength imbued in the process of thinking through relationality:

[I]ncreasingly, commodities are thought of as interfaces that can be actively engineered across a series of sensory registers in order to produce positive affective responses in consumers. Aided by a set of new material surfaces, commodities must appeal across all the senses, reminding us that the original meaning of the word 'aesthetics' was the study of the senses. Sensory design and marketing has become key... Thus, car doors are designed to give a satisfyingly solid clunk as they shut... Breakfast cereals are designed to give a distinct crunch... And so on. (Thrift, 2008, p. 39)

In art making similar sensory expansions occur, but formalism limits critical engagement with them. Cross-cultural discussions about ochre, however, are specifically sensory, and at the same time embedded in them are the formal qualities of materials that Rothwell sought to inscribe in critical writing. Looking at the ochre raises questions about source, was the soft white dug from a chalk mine or chipped away from a cliff-face, was the hard yellow ochre chiselled from

rocks or maybe collected on the side of the road, what is the tonal range available to the artist, when why and how are colours combined? Touching the ochre produces questions of the weight, picking up a bag full of yellow oxide rock provokes considerations of trade (where were these carried, over how wide a range, and even who carried them?), feeling the hardness prompts enquiries about how this material is prepared for painting (how does rock become pigments, what grain size is preferred by which artist, or what kinds of surfaces is it painted onto [bodies for performance; canvas for art sales])? Looking at and touching the soft, malleable white ochre with its high tincture ability provokes, in conservation, further enquiries that relate to science, conservation, ethics and cultural responsibility. What is the grain size in this pigment? What is its moisture content? If it is in a degraded state on an object what materials is it compatible with—for example, will it show tide lines if consolidated? Who has rights to retouch damaged areas? Should these areas even be touched?

This kind of materials-based enquiry challenges the 'barrier imposed by omission' that envelops discursive practice by enabling the return to the 'primary and unadorned text' and to the knowledge 'registered in the interstices.' (Foucault 1977, p. 135) At the same time, it embraces Barad's description of discursive practices as 'causal intra-actions' where 'Meaning is not a property of individual words or groups of words but an ongoing performance of the world in its differential intelligibility.' (Barad, 2003, p. 821) In this way, the critical pronouncements discussed earlier are identified as particular manifestations of an 'epistemological-ontological-ethical framework' that can be assessed, not by its content, but by the

absences of content. Most importantly, it makes an Indigenous ontology and epistemology available to fill a hitherto continuum of gaps and absences, and does so by securely grounding such discussion in a group of discourses that have comfortably spoken to and from each other for some time (aesthetics, primitivism, art criticism, artistic intention for example). Most significantly it is this Indigenous ontology that becomes the seminal point of departure for the continuum on which such discourses sit; what material, from where, how, who and for what purpose?

CONCLUSION

In 1987 conservators and curators came together to discuss overlapping interests at a conference entitled *The Articulate Surface*, held at the National Gallery of Australia. They sought to build a shared discourse between ‘the polarities of the painting as an image and the painting as an object—the ‘common zone of interest’ being ‘an articulate surface’. (Macnaughtan & Wallace, 1996, p. v) While the term ‘surface’ was privileged in the title, the papers discussed a much broader interest in the ‘articulation’ of the materials, from those chosen by the artist and sitting invisibly under the paint layers, to the varnish and subsequent layers of dirt and detritus that came to rest on the work over time and which served, often, to hide relationships to the artist. David Bomford, then Paintings Restorer at the National Gallery London, wrote:

Those of us who study the art of the past are conducting a dialogue with artists and craftsmen working centuries ago, and the medium of our

dialogue, the currency of our exchange, could not be more fragile or vulnerable. It depends on the survival of precious fragments of the past—paintings, sculptures, documents, books—and our ability to interpret them, to draw the correct conclusions and appreciate all the implications. (Bomford, 1996, p. 3)

What this statement indicates, and what became clear thirty years ago in that 1987 conference, was that the adjunctive adjective (*articulate*) was much more interesting when approached as a performative verb (*to articulate*) or proposed as an indicative noun (*articulation*) than as a metaphorical description of surface. For conservators, the summative function of the art object’s surface, which provides scholars and critics with a visual point of departure for studies of meaning, also acts as a material interlocutor, helping to unlock the potential for objects as sites of explanation through the actions of excavation, analysis and treatment. For conservators this process of excavation involves activities such as sample taking, X-radiography, infra-red reflectography and associated sub-surface examinations. Analysis becomes both a visual intercession in order to make meaning of the work as a site of creation, and a cerebral exploration achieved by linking various disciplinary enquiries (chemistry to understand material component parts, physics to locate the reasons for stress and deterioration, art history to determine intellectual and cultural contexts, and so on). Treatment brings together these enquiries and conversations in order to be able to pass the work into the future as both the subject and object of new enquiries. This is a heavily performative process—the

work is presented; discussions take place; positions are defined; decisions are communicated, contested, reformed and re-contested; intervention commences; a finished product is revealed; and new conversations take place as disciplines evolve and discourse and critical thinking emerge in a flow of examination, conversation, assessment and communication. This process is also heavily didactic, providing critics with limited opportunity to develop or access the structural intellectual tools that are needed for effective cross-cultural assessments.

Materiality enables the questions of authenticity to be contextualised and questioned.

For a conservator hoping to understand how the condition of a work may have been compromised from the artist's original intention, or how a degraded material may impact on an art historical reading of the painting, or how best to manage a request for loan in a travelling exhibition, it is the examining state of the materials that provides a most useful point of entry and the most effective basis for decision-making. Similarly, when the authenticity of a work is called into question, the examination of the materials indicates what other questions and processes are relevant. Accessing materiality as a structured approach identifies the many possible points of entry by which to engage with an object and its meaning. And developing the language required to read the materials overcomes the very real issues of accessing the very many different epistemologies that form the basis for the educated engagement; in conservation, in curatorship, in art practice and in criticism.

Materials have weight; quantifiably, allegorically and intellectually. As part of an intellectual toolkit, assessing materiality drives the need for clear

articulation across boundaries that include cultures, time, disciplines, belief systems, and in the case of art criticism across the boundaries between knowledge and ignorance. Such engagement fulfills a significant need, identified by Thrift, to increase 'the number of actors' spaces that can be recognized and worked with.' (2008, p. 17) This is the important outcome that speaks to Rothwell's challenge of how to promulgate informed, effective, critical inquiry. The result is the delinking of histories, hierarchies, professions, disciplines, and cultures, and the relinking of communities of research and practice in ways that spur new and much more meaningful conversations.

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