



Materiality & Process: The Physical Act and Properties of Materials as Central Meaning in Contemporary Art-Making

Francis Ankyiah¹, Frederick Bamfo²

¹Department of Art Education, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

²Department of Vocational and Technical Education, University of Cape Coast, Ghana

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ABSTRACT: This paper advocates a re-thinking of the artistic meaning, where in the work of some contemporary artists meaning is not merely a representation, but essentially a physical act of manufacture and the natural qualities of the materials used. Going beyond a semiotic or strictly conceptual approach, this paper used the method of comparative analysis to show that materiality and process are in turn the main bearers of content. It is examined with reference to the specific practices of four influential artists: William Kentridge, who uses erasable charcoal to create a palimpsest that literally embodies the process of memory and the process of historical change; Toyin Ojih Odutola, whose labour-intensive, mark-intensive practice physically enacts the convoluted systems of globalized information and power; Roni Horn, whose flowing behaviour of poured pigment or the meditative accretion of graphite marks is a direct enquiry into states of matter and directed perception; and Julie Mehretu, whose accumulative of ink and paint materialize the chaotic, overlapping systems of globalized information and power. With this narrowed analysis, the article argues that the act of creating something physical and the distinct features of the selected material is not merely a means to an end but, rather, the dwelling place of the conceptual and metaphorical strength of the work.

KEY WORDS: Materiality, Process, Contemporary Art, Art-Making

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INTRODUCTION

It is important to note that the experience of looking at a piece of art is personal, and physical. The viewer is presented with the instant immediacy of the artifact, the gritty feel of charcoal dust, the depths of thousands of ink hatches, the viscose of the drying pigment, or the disorder of the layers of applied paint. Such concrete reality as the trace of the hand of the artist and the irreducible thingness of the materials themselves are frequently discussed as the carrier of meaning, through which an idea can be expressed. But there is a marked departure of the contemporary artistic practice which requires critical re-orientation, one, which challenges the precedence of the representation, but which rather reads the very essence of artistic significance in the corporeal action of making, and the inborn behaviour of the medium to be used (Elkins, 1998).

This paper advocates a renewed assessment of the meaning of art and that, in the work of some of the most significant contemporary artists, the meaning is not merely depicted but actually constituted by both the physical act of creation and the innate characteristics of the materials. This analysis suggests that to these artists, materiality and process are the central and inseparable means of content, an analysis that is based on the fact that traditional semiotic paradigm, in which the artwork is a sign to a distinct idea, or an abstract idea, in which the idea is primary and the execution secondary is simply an outdated model of analysis (Krauss, 1999). The meaning is not behind the work; it is a part of its creation and form.

Four exemplary artists (William Kentridge, whose work with erasable charcoal and the act of drawing, erasing and redrawing to create a palimpsest) and writing (Toyin Ojih Odutola, where the labour-intensive, mark-intensive construction of images with pen and ink literally forms the content of the work) and rewriting (Roni Horn, where the fluid behaviour of the material itself becomes the content of the work) and erasure (Julie Mehretu, where the overlapping, and overlapped, systems of globalized information and

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power. In this specific analysis, this article argues that the physical process of creation, as well as the specific qualities of the material chosen, is not merely the means to the end, but rather the very point of the conceptual and metaphoric strength of the work, requiring a mode of criticism that is immensely involved in the operations of its own production.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Materiality

In order to capture the main point of this article, there has to be a distinct separation of material and materiality. A material is the physical matter used by the artist, example, the charcoal, ink, graphite or pigment. It is the uninspired matter lying in wait. Materiality is a much more prolific and dynamic concept though. It is the expressive ability, behavioural and cultural implications of that material. It includes the effects of smudging charcoal, the ghost of an erasure, the bleed of liquid pigment in drying or the possibility of applying ink in layers to produce translucency or opaqueness.

Moreover, materiality recognizes the fact that materials are not neutral; they have a historical, cultural and symbolic value. Carrying gold leaf into religious icons, as in the case, or using industrial tar as did Anselm Kiefer (fig. 1), pre imports sense even before a mark is laid. We should learn to see materials as not formless matter to be subdued, but as having a haptic quality and a variable plasticity which postulates possibilities to the artist as the argument of philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari indicates (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Thus, the study of materiality implies consideration of the particular agentic practices and histories of the materials per se.



Figure. 1: Anselm Kiefer, *Lilith*, 1987-1990. Oil, emulsion, shellac, charcoal, ash, clay, hair, lead, poppy on canvas
149 3/5 × 220 1/2 in | 380 × 560 cm.

Process

Likewise, process should be brought out of a technical process to a critical theoretical issue. It is the physical, temporal, and intellectual effort of creation like drawing, erasing, pouring or overlaying. This more materialistic turn also goes hand in hand with the history of Post-Minimalism and Process Art of the 1960s and 70s that made the act of making and the movement of time to be content in its own right, as in the art of Eva Hesse (fig. 2) or Richard Serra (fig. 3).



Figure. 2: Eva Hesse
Untitled or Not Yet, 1966



Figure. 3: Richard Serra *Cycle*, 2011
Gagosian Gallery

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA)

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The process is performative in nature and the artwork is a document of a movement and decision-making of a body over time. It is also a time-based practice whereby the meaning of the work is made visibly based on the investment of labour, time and repetition. No, it is not the secret, refined art of the academy but a conscious self-revelation of the coming-into-being of the work. The thousands of hatches in Toyin Ojih Odutola drawing are not merely a technique in this context, but are themselves a performative, durational event and form the subject of the work.

The real force of this analysis lies in the fact of materiality and process synthesis, which states that the meaning is created in an inseparable dialogue or even a negotiation between the intentional actions of the artist and the agency of the material. The material selected by the artist is selected because of its particular materiality, which initiates a process of which it is both caused and reacted to by the behaviour of that material. This propensity of the charcoal to smudge determines the process of erasure used by Kentridge; the flowing nature of the liquid pigment determines the results in the works of Roni Horn poured on paper. This association disputes the classical hierarchy of matter-over-form (hylomorphism), and is rather a collaborative emergence. This is the point in which the meaning of the work of art lies as in it is a document of an experience. A medium is not a medium of neutral support, as art historian Rosalind Krauss observed in her influential work on the so-called "post-medium condition"; rather, a medium is a recursive structure, a rule and behaviour pattern, which is interrogated by the practice of art (Krauss, 1999). It is through this synthesis that the artwork is not a fixed image that symbolizes an external concept, but as a witness to an active event of concept, action and matter merge. Its meaning is, thus, inherent in the physical and procedural fact of the work.

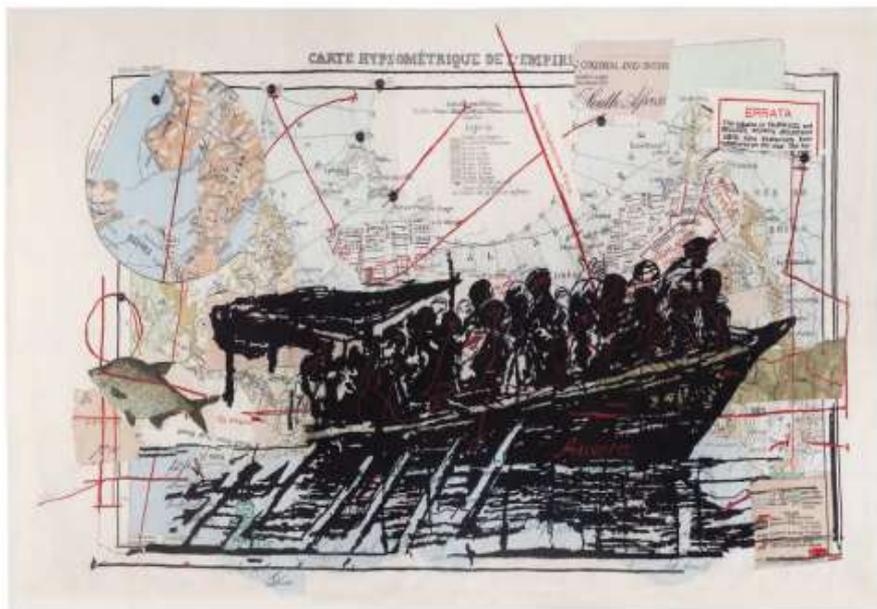
III. CASE STUDY

William Kentridge

To William Kentridge, artistic process is the end in itself, but also the engine of meaning. This is perhaps best demonstrated in his hallmark of stop-motion animation technique, which is a performative and durational practice of his own, physically altering one drawing over time, capturing a photographic image of each minute action. He does not use storyboard but lets the narrative develop in an instinctive manner using a direct drawing, erasing and drawing on the paper. It is a diabolical process of creating and destroying that he refers to as "stone-age filmmaking", and that renders the studio floor covered in coal dust and the drawing itself, a place of ongoing, visible change (Kentridge, 2014, p. 58). The last movie is thus an account of this performance, a schedule of its construction. Each frame is indexically connected to the physical gestures and choices of artist in the moment and favours the thinking through materials as compared to the actual implementation of a concept. This procedural based method opposed the uncanny smooth illusion of commercial animation, and instead anticipates the foregrounding of labour and time that goes into creating history and storytelling.

One of the most important elements of this conceptual framework is the material that Kentridge uses. He mostly uses charcoal and pastel, the mediums that he selects in their material qualities. Charcoal is naturally pliable, smoky, and granular; it is imminently dark and absolutely removable. Such obscurity and plasticity are not technical impediments, but the essence of his figurative speech. The residues left behind after one of these erasures is the nasty stain that will not fade away fully as it turns into a strong visual metaphor about memory, history, and the reality of impossibility to erase something completely. It creates a palimpsest, a sheet of paper on which earlier versions can be seen, just under the new one, as the way the past continues to inform and haunt the present. The record of change is made on the same sheet of paper as per art historian Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. The past is not forgotten, but it exists there, as a constituent of the current image, as a memory or a ghost" (Christov-Bakargiev, 1998, p. 22). The concept itself, in its behaviour, is the material: history is not a blank sheet but a progressive, disorganized, and frequently open-ended piling up of the past.

The main meaning of Kentridge's work is irreparably residing in the dialogue of his process and his material. The meaning is not a narrative apart of its telling; it is the action of revision itself and the factual manifestation of the time passing. His animations, usually based on the tense background of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa are not just the story of the historical events. Rather, they undergo the mental task of facing history: the issue with reconciliation to the past atrocities, the challenge of building a new identity, and the realization that erasure is after all nothing but a delusion. The sign of this struggle is the residue of the charcoal. The work postulates that the history, like the drawing, is a concept that is being written and rewritten all the time, but it still has the stains of its preceding versions. Thus, it is the meaning of a Kentridge work that is in its creation. It is a philosophical question about time and memory, which becomes real in the physical nature of the charcoal and the endless, staged act of applying and removing it.



**Figure. 4: William Kentridge, *Carte Hypsométrique de l'Empire Russe*, 2022
Hand-woven mohair tapestry. 400 x 600 cm
William Kentridge Studio, Johannesburg © William Kentridge**

Toyin Ojih Odutola

The artistic practice of Toyin Ojih Odutola is characterised by an extraordinary labour, in which the practice of mark-making is not a technique, but an act of embodiment. She uses a detailed, labour-intensive process of creating a form by the use of small marks such as hatches, stipples, swirls, etc. using basic tools such as ballpoint pen, charcoal, pastel, and marker. It is a meditative, intentional and timed practice that may take months of one drawing (fig. 4). The artist herself refers to it as a sort of “cartography”, a gradual mapping of a landscape that will be drawn in her hand (Ojih Odutola, 2017). It is essential physical activity; the repetitive, near ritual performances of creating thousands of individual marks are acts of care and attention. The huge amount of time is not concealed but is encoded in the very essence of the work, its visual impact. Such time-span element turns the drawing into a memory of the passed time and concentrated effort and therefore makes the very process of creating a focal point of the work.

The outcome of this complex action is a materiality uniqueness, in which the surface of the drawing becomes a glowing, haptic, and topographical object. The skin depicted by Ojih Odutola is not created in a representational manner, but rather created by means of tactical accretive marks. The ink or pastel is applied in layers so that the range of tones produced by it are simply gorgeous and the effect is of depth almost as though it glowed internally. The surface turns into an intricate topography of light-catching ridges and valleys, and has a physical nature that surpasses its two-dimensional support. This is a materiality created necessary to her project. Her mark-making, as described in the exhibition catalogue of “To Wander Determined” leads to a sumptuous, otherworldly luminosity, which defies the traditional representations of Blackness, suggesting instead a more vision of subjectivity that is rich, nuanced, and radiant. The materiality, the manner in which light is playing with her accumulated surfaces is a direct carrier of meaning, indicating interiority, dignity and the complexity of being.

The focus of the meaning in the work of Ojih Odutola is the direct proportions of the physical building of the picture and the conceptual building of identity. The meticulously created stages of creating a face or a body (fig. 5), with its thousands of unique marks, is a strong metaphor of the slow, complicated, cumulative process of self-formation. Every mark may be regarded as an experience, a memory, a gene or a story which adds to the whole. Her fictions of fictional Nigerian aristocratic families are aimed at discussing heritage and personal narrative not through the literal narration but with the help of this material metaphor. The tediousness can be seen as the work, time, and attention to one’s identity and legacy. As Ljungberg Christian noted, her work is involved in the imaginative, narrative, and aesthetic construction of identity, which is brought to be seen and felt through her approach (Ljungberg, 2009). Thus, meaning of Ojih Odutola drawing cannot be separated of the making of it which is the complex, independent identity of her subjects reflected by the complex, independent process of material production. According to the work the identity, similar to the drawing, is not something but carefully and beautifully constructed.



Figure. 5: 'Sadie' (Zadie Smith), by Toyin Ojih Odutola, 2018-2019

Roni Horn

Throughout a large part of her work, Roni Horn transfers authorial power onto the inherent behaviour of her materials, leaving their material qualities to shape the eventual form and content of the work (fig. 6). *This can be best seen in her poured pigment paintings, either of the "Yet 9" or the "As IX 1987-8"* (fig. 7), in which the liquid pigment is poured on a flat surface and allowed to dry. In such works, the artist sets the parameters such as the viscosity of the pigment to experiment with the dimensions of the support, but the final result is dictated by phenomena of nature: gravity, evaporation, reaction of medium constituents. These final shapes, with their rocky edges, clear cores, and random topographies are literal documents of the transformation of the material through its liquid diminutions into a solid form. According to Horn, "the work is concerning the thing in itself", a discussion of the nature of a substance (Cooke, Duve, & Neri, 2000). In this case, one cannot speak of material as a vehicle of representation, but rather the content itself. It makes the work a pure inquiry into states of matter and essence, into the singular, inimitable identity of a physical substance in its time.



Figure. 6: Yet 9

**2017 / 2020 Powdered pigment, graphite, charcoal, colored pencil and varnish on paper
286.1 x 246.4 cm / 112 5/8 x 97 in 298.8 x 258.8 x 8.9 cm / 117 5/8 x 101 7/8 x 3 1/2 in (framed)**



Figure. 7: Roni Horn
As IX 1987–8

Pigment and varnish on paper

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection Gift, 2005
© The artist, courtesy Hauser & Wirth Zürich London

On the other hand, in her long series of graphite drawings, Horn has adopted an extremely restrained and repetitive procedure that replicates the very perception. Such works as those in the series of Keys and Cues are constructed with the assistance of thick, small marks in billions of very fine lines or scratches drawn with such accuracy. This is labour-intensive not to create an illusion but to create a smooth, near invisible optical vibration on the surface. It is a meditative and time-based process that demands and generates a state of increased attention. This is directly correlated to the experience of the viewer. When one gazes at these drawings, they find themselves moving into a leisurely mode of visual perception; the eye has to adapt to the slight changes in tonality and texture. The art, consequently, is turned into a machine of creating some sort of perception. This effect is termed as “opticality” which reveals that the drawing is not a representation of light, but it is light, and more precisely an occurrence of light, just like the occurrence of its creation. Making and seeing merge into each other, and thus the viewer with his or her prolonged attention becomes the object of the artwork.

The overall gist of the multifaceted practice of Roni Horn is that it completely dissolves the traditional division of the material/process and concept. Both via the aleatoric agency of poured pigment or via the scrupulous accretion of graphite marks, her work poses a non-representational inquiry directly to the questions of being, presence and what perception entails. The meaning is not the object of the work; it is the action of the work. A drawn pigment in poured form is a form of embodiment of change and material nature. A graphite drawing is a show of concentration, and a reflector to the perceptual abilities of the viewer. This synthesis strikes against the subject/object dichotomy, and argues that how we construct the world is dependent on an ongoing interaction of embodiment with the physical substances and surfaces through which we engage with it. The work of Horn, as is expressed in her monograph, always dwells on the concept of a thing, not the image of a thing, but on its very specificity, its uniqueness, its being there at that time in that way (Horn, 2000, p. 15).

Finally, her art suggests that the only way to see an object or indeed a person or a place is to experience its material in-reducible presence and the processes that have created it.

Julie Mehretu

The artistic process of Julie Mehretu is the aggressive process of construction and deconstruction, which can be described as the visual archaeology, or geology. She starts with underdrawings usually architectural plans, maps, or charts drawn on the canvas and then subjected to a hideous cycle of additive and subtractive drawing. She applies ink, acrylic, paint sticks, and airbrush to lay up thick deposits of gestural lines, geometric shapes and nebulous washes (fig. 8). Most importantly, this is not the process of accumulation as a whole; she often obscures, removes, or sands down the earlier layers to form a very stratified and palimpsestic surface. This physical dig and reconstruction replicate geological processes where history is enshrined in sediment, or archaeological ones where civilizations take the rubble of their forebears. Her canvases as Sarah Lewis observes are a product of an extended, tedious process of accretion and subtraction, of developing a chaotic and swarming universe of marks that is both ancient and pressing and contemporary (Lewis, 2010). The very process itself represents the ever-present change of flux, construction and destruction which is a hallmark of the globalized world.

The physical outcome of this intensive process is a chaotic information saturated surface that is used as a direct physical simile of complex, overlapping systems. The completed work does not visualize a network and a city; its materiality itself becomes pictorial.

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The textures of the underlying data are a structural armature, whereas the hectic, multi-directional scribbles that are overlaid create the impression of the frantic circulation of capital, the flow of people, the digital passing of information, and the volcanic eruption of political discord. The representation is the material accumulation which is the sheer density of visual information. It is a type of tumultuous viscosity as explained which forms a new mapping of the world that is not topographic but systemic, the invisible forces of power, migration (fig. 9), and exchange that makes our reality. The viewer is faced with visual noise which is not only overwhelming but also coherent, which is similar to the experience of moving through the world that is filled with information and intertwined and contradictory stories. The meaning of the painting is its material appearance: a corrupted archive of the 21st century. The key idea behind the work of Julie Mehretu is the fact that the world of chaotic material accumulation is the image of the invisible, intricate forces that define the modern global life. Her work asserts that those systems which shape our life like the financial markets, the networks of the digital, the geopolitical borders are too big, abstract and complex to be painted in a figurative manner. Rather, they can be fashioned solely in parallel material system, instance, a canvas constructed in a similar fashion with the help of overlaying, impacting, deleting, and creating. It does not exist in any particular mark or symbol but in the total energy, speed and density of the whole field. According to Mehretu herself, her art is all about creating stories and narratives but without saying the exact things that happened... charting the psychological landscape of our age (Mehretu, 2009). Thus, her works are not abstract representations of disorder, but material expressions of the same. They render the invisible forces of globalization physical, a rich and bodily experience of the networks of power and information that represent our contemporary state.



Figure. 8: Julie Mehretu, "Black City" (2007), ink and acrylic on canvas, 120 x 192 inches (Pinault Collection, Paris, France, © Julie Mehretu)



Figure. 9: Julie Mehretu, "Migration Direction Map" (1996), ink on mylar, 22 x 15 inches, private collection (© Julie Mehretu)

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IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

In the different practices of Kentridge, Ojih Odutola, Horn and Mehretu, three strong unifying threads found in their work unite their practices around the main thesis that the meaning is made in the materiality and process.

Time and Labour

The investment of time and physical labour is visually embedded in the meaning of each of the artists. This time value is not concealed but is incorporated into the structure of the picture itself. In the case of Toyin Ojih Odutola, it is the thousands of hours taken in hatching an image. In the case of William Kentridge, it is the time like performance the time itself recorded in the frames of his animation, a unit of time, each drawn and redrawn. The graphite drawings of Roni Horn require great time in her careful execution, whereas the poured pigments, need time to dry and cure. The canvases of Julie Mehretu can be considered possibly the most monumental record of labour, accrued over months or years into monolithic records of mark-making. In both instances, the art is made into a monument of its own temporal its own creation and process rather than of instantaneity.

The Indexical Trace

All the four artists work as an indexical record, as a tangible physical trace of an activity or being. This is the notion based on semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce, and developed in art theory by Rosalind Krauss, and is at the core of their practices. The trace of erasure is the charcoal dust of Kentridge; the trace of her repetitive movement is the hatches of Ojih Odutola; the trace of the behaviour of a liquid is the poured pools of Horn; the trace of countless decisions she made to compose the image is her layers. The piece is not a simulation, but remains of its own emergence, giving more importance to the true trace of the event rather than its creation of an illusion (Krauss, 1977).

Metaphor from Matter

More importantly, the essence of the metaphors created by all four artists are produced out of the mere physical behaviour of the materials they select. The metaphor is not a concept that is applied to an unemotional substance; it arises as a result of a conversation with the agency of the material. The nature of charcoal to be erased has led to the unreliable memory theme by Kentridge. The additive, building aspect of ink hatches is what gives rise to investigation of constructed identity by Ojih Odutola. The fluidity of pigment and the ability of graphite to change in the slightest are what urge Horn to ask questions of states of being and perception. The power to layer, scrape, and collide paint is what causes Mehretu to create a representation of global chaos. They both represent an anti-hylomorphic (inflicting form on passive matter) approach but both are involved in a process whereby continuity of the material-metamorphosis becomes the essential thing (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986).

The artists have quite dissimilar approaches in spite of these strong similarities, which demonstrate the versatility of the material-process paradigm.

The most notable point of departure is their very approaches of use. William Kentridge uses a mostly subtractive approach. It is his meaning created by deletion, erasure, and by the ghostly afterimage of that. On the contrary, the process of Toyin Ojih Odutola is additive and vicious. Her connotation is constructed by the multitude of marks which will join together in the whole construction and meaning. The former functions by removal to uncover the past and the latter functions by addition to create the past.

The second important point of divergence has to do with attitude to material simplicity or complexity. Roni Horn frequently indulges in a minimal interest of material concentration, reducing the behaviour of one material (graphite, poured pigment) to elaborate on its nature and generate a state of focused attention. Her writing is frequently of diminution and clarity. Julie Mehretu on the other works on the basis of maximalist material layering. She combines a symphony of media (ink, acrylic, paint stick, printed material) to form a multifaceted, congested visual space, which recalls the contemporary life ideology of chaos. The work by Horn is able to drag the viewer into a single, meditative experience, whereas Mehretu bombards him with a plethora of information.

These variations demonstrate that primacy of materiality and process is not a single style but rather an ideas richness, able to produce remarkably different versions and meanings out of the closely personal to the titanic by its specific deployment by an individual artist.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has proposed a radical re-positioning of the process of meaning-making by art, and suggested that in one important part of the contemporary practice, meaning does not precede or externalize the making of the work but is inherently encoded within it. The bodily process of creation and the active and agent nature of the selected materials is not only the means of expression but the very seat of the conceptual and metaphorical power of the work. Leaving behind a semiotic model that reduces the artwork to a sign of a detached conception, or a completely conceptual model that gives precedence to the immaterial thought, we were able to navigate an even deeper and more material meaning, the meaning that is practiced, acted out, and constructed.

The case studies studied both justify this paper by their different methodologies. William Kentridge shows that process and materiality itself are the metaphor when the revising process of the memory and the revision of the history is physically incarnated through the erasing of the charcoal. Toyin Ojih Odutola discloses how identity is constructed conceptually by literally, painstakingly

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building a drawn surface, in which time and labour are the media of care. Roni Horn entirely breaks down the subject-object division, providing works where the behaviour of matter (poured pigment) or the activity of perception (graphite marks) has become the only content, the question of being itself. Lastly, it is evident that the most complicated and abstract organisms of the 21st century can be modelled only by a similar process of stratification and chaos of material because Julie Mehretu demonstrates that the canvas is the physically real material analogue of global networks. The combination of all these makes them a powerful four parts that demonstrate that meaning is a result of the dialogue between the conscious activity of the artist and the intelligence of the material world.

This framework has far reached implications that are not limited to the analysis of the four artists, but it suggests that there is a significant approach towards change in the art criticism and interpretation. It demands a criticism which is thoroughly in contact with physical and procedural facts of the artistic act like a criticism which is as concerned with the kind of charcoal employed and how it is applied as with the iconography it describes. This method would require of us to view with longer and more attentive eyes and realize that taking time to see a piece should be equal to the amount of time taken to create the piece. It calls on us to inquire not only, "What does it represent"? but "how it was made", and "why with these materials"? This is a material-process-based criticism promoted by such theorists as James Elkin, which advocates a corporeal form of seeing that links our perception to the haptic, temporal and labour-intensive aspect of art-making as such. Through this, it re-establishes a crucial linkage to the piece of art as a singular physical witness to the human thought and labour, provides a strong remedy to the dematerialised and accelerating stream of images in the digital world.

Finally, it maintains that in the mundane and corporeal gesture of a hand tracing over a surface, pushing a bit of charcoal or dragging a drop of ink, some of the most gigantic questions concerning history, identity and being can be found.

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