

# MATERIAL SIGNIFICANCE IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Rebecca Gordon

**ABSTRACT** Contemporary artists are faced with a cacophony of choice when it comes to materials. With this expanded practice, where everything and anything could be considered a material, come questions for those charged with the care of these works: how do we discern the artwork's materials and their role in the identity of the work? By examining the use of 'people' and 'context' as materials by the artists Aileen Campbell, Justin Carter and Toby Paterson, this paper assesses the function of these materials in the work, introducing the terms 'material structure' and 'material as signifier' to aid the investigation. This process will deepen our understanding of the complex identities of such contemporary artworks, informing their successful stewarding into the future.

## Introduction

Since the inception of the Readymade, any and every material is available for artists to use. The blurring of art and life reached a climax in the 1950s, with Allan Kaprow proclaiming in 1958: 'Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things that will be discovered by the present generation of artists.'<sup>1</sup> With this democratisation of choice and adoption of ephemeral materials, comes a dilemma for those charged with giving the artwork a future: how do we determine the artwork's materials and their role in the identity of the work? This paper proposes that discerning the function of an artwork's materials will enable a better understanding of the constitution of the work and the significance of its attributes, informing the successful stewarding of the work into the future.

For the purpose of addressing different functions of an artwork's materials, I will introduce the terms 'material structure' and 'material as signifier' and discuss their significance and interconnection in relation to the work of artists Aileen Campbell (b.1968), Justin Carter (b.1973) and Toby Paterson (b.1974) (see the Appendix). These artists were interviewed during the course of my doctoral research on material significance and authenticity in Contemporary Art.<sup>2</sup> Along with nine others (see the Acknowledgements), these artists were approached for interview for a variety of reasons: their use of unusual materials; their use of more 'traditional' materials; those who have to consider reinstallation or replacement of materials within their work; and

others whose materials might not be immediately apparent. Aileen Campbell's materials might be identified under this last criterion. She creates 'voiceworks' that manifest themselves in the dialogue between the performed event and its documentation: her material is essentially the pitched voice, she herself being a trained chorister. The work of Justin Carter could be discussed in terms of his use of unusual or problematic materials (he has used vegetables and chewing gum for example) as well as replacement of certain materials and issues surrounding the reinstallation of his work. Toby Paterson, on the other hand, tends to use fairly stable materials. He uses quality brands for his wall paintings and his works on acrylic are designed to the highest specification to avoid unnecessary degradation. It is intended that this paper might deepen our understanding of the complex identities of contemporary artworks as a prerequisite to the process of decision-making undertaken for a work in need of conservation or reinstallation. The voices of these artists and examples of their work will be called upon in this exploration.

## Changing perspectives

Historically, the medium in art was the vehicle for expression, not an end in itself. In painting, the paint and canvas were the tools with which to render the three-dimensional scene in two-dimensions and the means by which to represent iconography. For this reason, materials and substances were chosen by artists for their longevity rather than their meaning in order to perpetuate the expression into the

future.<sup>3</sup> The ideology of Modernism, however, defined each art in accordance with the nature of its medium. Greenberg, for example, the patriarch of Modernism, proposed that the uniqueness of the medium of painting was its 'flatness'.<sup>4</sup> He worked with the terms 'Art for art's sake' and 'pure poetry' (based on the nineteenth-century *l'art pour l'art* movement), inciting the avoidance of subject matter or content in exchange for a concentration on the 'purity' of the medium.<sup>5</sup> It was the specificity of the artistic medium and the particular response demanded by the inherent nature of the material that was of interest in this context. The medium was often an end in itself, an expression of delight in its material qualities. With the adoption of ready-made objects, 'art changed its focus from the form of language to what was being said', as Joseph Kosuth explained in relation to the work of Duchamp.<sup>6</sup> This was augmented in conceptual art, when what was said often appeared more important than the way it was articulated. Artists such as Lawrence Weiner and Robert Barry were shifting attention from the physical object onto the ideas themselves. In *The Dematerialisation of the Art Object*, Lucy Lippard defined conceptual art as 'work in which the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or "dematerialized"'.<sup>7</sup> The significance of materials to an artwork's identity is anything but straightforward. This paper offers a way of approaching this complex task of discerning material significance in order to inform reinstallation and conservation decision-making.

The artists consulted for this research have something in common: the Glasgow School of Art. This was not a deliberate consideration when approaching these artists about material choice and significance, but simply confirms the central role of the Glasgow School of Art in the neo-conceptual movement that had taken root in Scotland and beyond by the 1990s when most of these artists were studying. Lippard's definition cited above captures something of the mentality of this dematerialised art, which became the foundational ideology of the newly established Department of Environmental Art at the Glasgow School of Art in 1985 under the leadership of David Harding. The students were encouraged to use everyday life as a stimulus, while responding to critical theory and the specificity of site and audience. With it came the doctrine, 'The context is half the work', drawn from John Latham and Barbara Stevini's 1965 Artists' Placement Group. Twenty-five years later, this mantra continues to be faithfully chanted throughout the department's studios. Justin Carter now teaches there; Aileen Campbell received her MFA from the Glasgow School of Art in 2005; and Toby Paterson studied in its Painting Department. The central role of the art school in the shaping of cutting-edge contemporary art cannot be overlooked – with a disproportionate number of its alumni having been nominated for, or have won, the Turner Prize – and was a significant factor in the coining of the term 'The Glasgow Miracle' by the Swiss curator Hans Ulrich Obrist.<sup>8</sup> This cultural and artistic background has inevitably shaped these artists' systems of decision-making: their choice and use of materials and how the concept

is realised in material form. With any material being open for use, and explored within this context of 'dematerialisation', what do these contemporary artists consider to be their materials and what role do these materials play within their work?

## Material as 'structure' or 'signifier'?

The most consistent answer to this question in the interviews I conducted was that materials were thought of as 'tools'. Ross Sinclair put it this way: 'materials are just one of the tools that are utilised in that whole [creative] process'.<sup>9</sup> Campbell explained that the materials are 'any tools you use' in the creation of an artwork.<sup>10</sup> In the interview she differentiated between the 'pitched voice' as her 'main material' and other elements such as sound and video editing that she described as 'material structure'. However, conversations can become cyclical when trying to pin down the often intuitive process of an artist's choice of materials and their significances, evidenced when Campbell concluded that, 'Anything that contributes to the work is a material'. When we talk about an artwork there is often slippage between the delineation of materials that contribute to the metaphorical meaning of the work and materials that simply carry the work's physical or aesthetic identity. In relation to this latter sense, Campbell's term 'material structure' is useful. Materials that incite meaning could instead be referred to as 'materials as signifiers'.

This reference to 'signifier' is used not without acknowledgement of its complex semiotic function.<sup>11</sup> It is adopted in this context, not necessarily in the structuralist approach of a clearly defined system of orders and dichotomies, but rather in the sense of being an initial trigger for the process of investing meaning. It is used here as the gateway to connotative value, whether by literal denotation (not dissimilar to Panofsky's 'primary meaning', evidenced through 'artistic motifs')<sup>12</sup> or as a signifier of a denotative sign (a denotation that leads to a chain of connotations).<sup>13</sup> It points to there being more to the artist's material choice than taxonomic structure: Anya Gallaccio's use of organic materials such as flowers, ice and chocolate, which are left to decay and change over time, prompts a challenge to romantic notions of nature and culture, life and death; Cathy Wilkes' specific use of objects often found in domestic settings, placed on or around female mannequins, directly shapes how the work is read. The metaphorical significance of these materials relates directly to what the artist intends to communicate through the work.

'Material structure', then, might be described as those materials that carry with them no deliberate significance other than as the support for the expression (the notepad on which the letter is written, as it were). Paterson's use of vinyl paint in his wall paintings is a case in point. It was a 'prosaic' choice, he explained, that related to suitability for purpose: 'in large areas of wall paintings, [vinyl paint] is such a great material to use and obviously sort of ties in with the kind of water-based agenda I have for all other

painting purposes'.<sup>14</sup> He then chose Lascaux acrylics for the details because, he explained, 'what I'm looking for is colour saturation and the majority of the time physical and visual flatness and easy controllability tonally. And that Lascaux stuff is the best I've used. You pay a premium for it but it's really worth it'. These material choices contribute to the aesthetic of the work and the legibility of its reading, but are not so inextricably linked with the underlying concept. They were chosen for their physical and aesthetic properties. Laurenson has made the distinction between the value of functional and aesthetic elements within a work, or a combination thereof, as an aid to conservation decision-making (particularly in relation to time-based media).<sup>15</sup> At a basic level, the notion of 'material structure' encapsulates this observation.

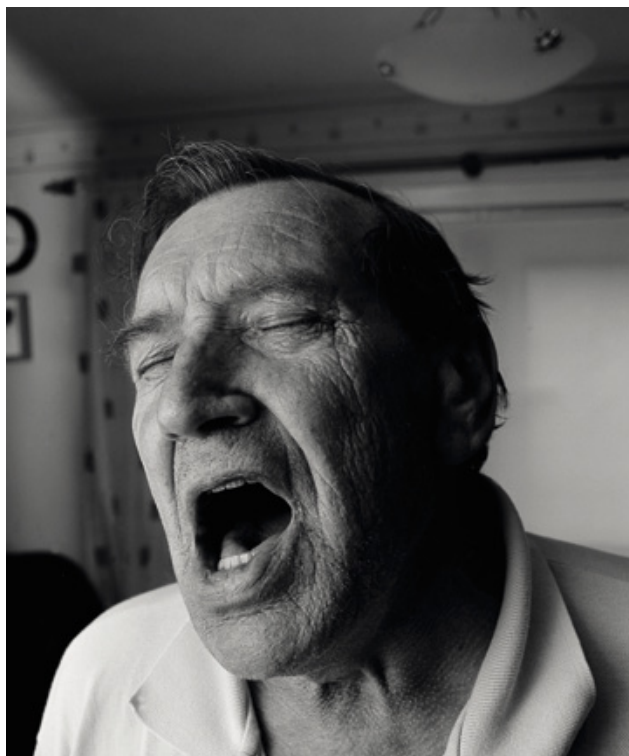
A well-known example to help clarify this distinction would be Zoe Leonard's *Strange Fruit (For David)* (1992–97).<sup>16</sup> The work's material structure consists of fruit skins that have been sewn back together (the Philadelphia Museum of Art describes the materials as: orange, banana, grapefruit, lemon, and avocado peels with thread, zippers, buttons, sinew, needles, plastic, wire, stickers, fabric, and trim wax). They provide the vehicle for the expression and a very particular aesthetic. Indeed the space in which they are exhibited might also contribute to this structure. However, it became clear during the process of conservation treatment that these materials contributed more than structure to the work. Christian Scheidemann had begun the process of shock-freezing the pieces of fruit and soaking them with the consolidant Paraloid B72 under a vacuum when Leonard decided that the mere appearance of decay was insufficient for her intention.<sup>17</sup> She explained that, 'Eventually I reached the decision that the piece needed to be perishable and that in fact the heart and soul of the piece was about it being temporary and fragile. So I made a conscious decision not to preserve it. The kernel of the piece is that it does decay'.<sup>18</sup> This is an example of an artwork's identity – and subsequent instructions and directives – only being understood and consolidated upon acquisition or conservation. Through this process Leonard was able to assess the role of the materials within the work as being providers of significance. Their function, therefore, is predominantly symbolic. This realisation subsequently determined its conservation strategy: documenting its decay in photographs and providing adequate storage to try to minimise deterioration (and unwelcome infestations) during periods of dormancy.

I ought to offer the caveat at this point that introducing such binary terms as 'structure' and 'signifier' is not unproblematic. Tina Fiske made such an observation in relation to 'medium-suffixes' (a collective term she gives to '-specific', '-variable', '-independent' and so on), proposed by projects such as the Variable Media Network.<sup>19</sup> She contends that binaries such as 'variable' and 'specific' might leave us with 'an oversimplified or bifurcated vocabulary'.<sup>20</sup> Such terminology that is characterised by antonyms, she argues, has inevitable consequences for artworks that function on a continuum, namely 'installed

artworks'. She makes the observation in relation to Andy Goldsworthy's installation *Herd of Arches* (1994), noting that its subsequent reinstallation in 2005 – the result of a third party sale and exhibition loan agreement – overlooked the importance of the actual stone that Goldsworthy used, which favoured 'the movability and informality of construction that characterize its making and early phase'.<sup>21</sup> Stone, for Goldsworthy, does not signify a 'relic' or 'brittleness', the way Ippolito described stone when he called for a museological 'paradigm shift' in respect of new media artworks.<sup>22</sup> Instead, Fiske argues that Goldsworthy sees stone as synonymous with Ippolito's description of the 'variable character' of contemporary artworks, as 'a succession of linked events that, like a stream of water, endures by remaining variable'.<sup>23</sup> Opposites and binaries may have their place as methods with which to identify and challenge accepted assumptions, but they ought to provide a springboard for extra-paradigmatic research rather than classification as an end in itself. In this vein Fiske went on to adopt Derridean notions of deconstruction in a later paper as a way to challenge conventional discussions on reinstallation, drawing particularly on the concepts of absence, rupture and difference.<sup>24</sup>

Yet the structure of binaries is a prevalent method of investigation across disciplines. In the context of cultural heritage and material culture, Daniel Miller warned of the pitfalls of a dualistic or reductionist approach,<sup>25</sup> and Amareswar Galla called for binary oppositions to be disbanded in order to be able to recognise wider cultural values.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, when developing new conceptual frameworks within conservation, as Laurenson proposed in relation to time-based media works of art, the dichotomy of Goodman's 'autographic' and 'allographic' distinction was called upon.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the distinction between materials as 'structure' or 'signifier' ought to be held lightly, otherwise awkward limitations may be placed on the artwork. The distinction is not always clear-cut and requires a case-by-case approach. No generalisations can be made. Yet it is useful as a method to support analysis of an artwork's identity, particularly when variation or absence enters the fold upon reinstallation of the work or in the process of its conservation. A miscommunication of the work is at stake, as evidenced in the example of *Strange Fruit*.

The manifestation of this distinction in an artwork may not be straightforward. This complexity is heightened when dealing with artworks that operate in the aftermath of the 'expanded field', when every material, whether ready-made or yet-to-be-made, is open for use.<sup>28</sup> Added to this is the inevitable variation of material significance – between artists and within an artist's oeuvre – as materials 'are given new and unexpected meanings by every artist who works with them', Hummelen acknowledges.<sup>29</sup> In the interviews conducted for this research, a number of artists described their materials in this expanded way naming, for example, 'people' and 'context' as materials. It will be helpful to use these named materials in our investigation of material function as this may allow us to move beyond examples already infused with connotation (such as stone and water,



**Figure 1** Aileen Campbell, *Starform – Alex*, 2007, production still, 35.5 × 29.9 cm, black and white print. (Photo: Aileen Campbell, courtesy the artist.)

indicated above) in order to gain some understanding of the role of materials in the identity of the artwork.

## People as ‘material’

### *People as signifier*

Among her materials, Aileen Campbell named ‘people.’ When describing her artwork *Starform* (2007) (Figure 1) she explained, ‘The people are the material. So I simply pay them and use people, or ask people, who I know would be interested in doing it’. In this case it was her father, Alex, who took the main role. The piece is tailored around his life choices and Campbell’s reaction to them. His character and life fundamentally shape the concept of the work. The video begins with him watching the horseracing schedule on Teletext while reading the corresponding form guide. A woman’s voice announces, ‘Out-play them at Bridge!’ followed by a presenter saying in an English accent in the background, ‘So after our immediate first impressions of a person, we then go on to try to find out more about them.’ Campbell explains, ‘This is a fairly vulgar character to me ... But then he had this little heroic turnaround, I suppose, or this little surprise where he could actually do something that perhaps redeemed his character.’ It is at this point in the video that we watch the ‘heroic turnaround’. With accompanying string and oboe players squeezed into his living room, Alex begins to sing ‘Oh Holy Night’. Campbell’s inspiration for this video piece was a composition by Gavin Bryars, which had as its centrepiece the recording of a

London tramp singing ‘Jesus’ Blood Never Failed Me Yet’, which was originally recorded in 1975 for a documentary that was never released.<sup>30</sup> The man’s singing voice and his hope-filled song were his deliverance. Campbell acknowledges that *Starform* ‘has to be about that person, it can’t be about me, it has to be about that situation, that event, that particularity I suppose’. She explained that if it were to be remade, the work would have to be renamed and a new character found. This suggests the hallmarks of an entirely new work. It would at best be a version, stemming from the same idea. Therefore the character, or the person, could be described as a material that shapes the identity and resultant interpretation of the work. It is Alex’s story. He could be described as the ‘material signifier’.

### *People as structure*

*Starform*’s ‘material structure’ therefore would be the tools that support the expression of that ‘material signifier’: ‘The sound and video editing, that’s a whole material structure ... All the technical stuff, all the equipment or whatever.’ This encapsulates Laurenson’s ‘function’ value, namely elements that may not be visible or fundamental to the work’s aesthetic or significance but enable the manifestation of the expression. To apply the idea of ‘material structure’ to ‘people as material’, the case of interactive art might be illustrative, such as Vito Acconci’s *Following Piece* (1969). Acconci essentially used people to shape his path through the streets of New York, stalking them until they reached the haven of private space. On the surface these people might appear to be the subject of his investigation, the ‘meaning’ of the work. However, I would suggest that the participant (or more accurately the subject of the stalk) did not necessarily affect the work as a concept but rather contributed to its structure. The participants were the vehicle for the expression, as it were, the outworking of the concept, and not in themselves carriers of significance.

## Context as ‘material’

### *Context as signifier*

The context of an artwork was also cited in the interviews as a material by some of the artists. In the same way that people can be used both in a structural and a symbolic sense, context should not be understood generically. Context could be understood as either an external factor or an internal aspect that shapes the work’s identity, whether structurally or conceptually. The former is particularly apparent when an artwork moves between different environments. This was the case with Justin Carter’s *Sustainable Indulgence* (2004) (Figure 2) and its interplay with a subsequent commission for the Aichi Expo’ in Japan the following year. *Sustainable Indulgence* was first made for a biennale in Whitstable and was a functional solar-powered ice-cream stall. Over





**Figure 2** Justin Carter, *Sustainable Indulgence*, 2004, solar-powered ice-cream stall. Originally commissioned for the Whitstable Biennale, 2004. (Courtesy the artist.)

the period of about two weeks, Carter journeyed along England's East Kent coastline producing and serving fresh ice cream made from locally sourced organic ingredients. He hoped that the 'performance' would stimulate various facets of discussion, including sustainable energy generation, the 'alchemy' of turning raw ingredients into ice cream or something hot into something cold, and questioning the manifestation and consequences of social interaction. According to Carter, art, by its very nature, is reflective. It should not be dogmatic or have 'a particular message'. 'It has a whole range and level of different messages going on at the same time, which allow the viewer to become part of that process of reflection', Carter explains.<sup>31</sup> The audience, in a way, became part of *Sustainable Indulgence*: having been gifted ice creams that were made through the conversion of solar power into electricity, they became the final step in the chain by ingesting the product of that energy (perhaps suggesting that the audience became another interchangeable structure within the work). In giving away ice creams, Carter did not at first appreciate that another strand to the debate would be introduced: the politics of gifting. He was surprised by how difficult it was to give something away:

That idea of giving a gift to somebody is actually not as easy as you would imagine. People are so accustomed



**Figure 3** Justin Carter, *Sustainable Indulgence II*, 2005, exhibited at Aichi Expo', Toyota City Museum. (Courtesy the artist.)



**Figure 4** Toby Paterson, *Black Elegy*, 2004, acrylic paint, Perspex, MDF. (© CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection, courtesy the artist.)



**Figure 5** Toby Paterson, *Black Elegy (version 2)*, 2004/2011, acrylic paint, Perspex, MDF. (© CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection, courtesy the artist.)



**Figure 6** Toby Paterson, *Sunlit Emergency Exit (Anderston version)*, 2004, acrylic paint. (© CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection, courtesy the artist.)

to handing over money in receipt of something. On a couple of occasions people weren't that happy in receiving a free ice cream, which I thought was quite bizarre.

Carter proposed that this was suggestive of our capitalist context, now ingrained in the European social psyche. Thus the materials that Carter used (the solar panels, ice cream and ice-cream stall itself) as well as the geographical context and human players involved, all brought significance to the experience and meaning of the work.

Context as signifier is particularly evident in relation to the second 'version' of the work, *Sustainable Indulgence II* (2005) that was displayed at the Toyota Municipal Museum (Figure 3). Carter felt that to simply ship the Whitstable version to Japan would be inappropriate on two counts: first, that the British significance of the consumption of ice cream 'by the seaside' would be lost in the new context; and second, that the expense and environmental implications of transporting the work to Japan would undermine the ethical debate prompted by the work. Although Carter was invited to exhibit the Whitstable version, he decided to use the opportunity to redesign and remake the work in order to acknowledge the different situation and audience. All the materials were replaced: the steel was supplanted by aluminium and the whole mechanism was redesigned to be telescopic to fit in a small space. The mechanism was then placed within the lightweight shipping container, which became part of the body of the sculpture. Instead of the brightly painted stall of the original incarnation, the shipping crate suggested a more functional value. As a result, the sculpture bore the scars of its journey from Britain to Japan, with the various markings and customs stamps illustrating where it came from and how it got to this new context. Carter wanted to present not just the work in the gallery, but the existence of the work 'as an item to be stored, an item that was shipped, and acknowledges itself as part of that art world, if you like, which people don't always think about'. He wanted to reveal the hidden identities of the work. In this sense, *Sustainable Indulgence II* was more of an autonomous sculpture than a prop within a 'performance' or social interaction. The two 'versions', or 'iterations' as Carter suggests, are different works that stem from the original concept.<sup>32</sup> The material choices Carter made in relation to these works individually and comparatively are significant in determining his intention and the works' implied meanings. The external contexts of the works essentially shaped the way they would be received and understood due to cultural significances and, in turn, influenced their material incarnations.

### *Context as structure*

By way of comparison, the wall paintings of Toby Paterson have a particularly functional relationship with their



context. When asked what he considered to be the materials of *Black Elegy* (2004) (Figure 4), Paterson replied:

It's obviously on a sort of standard gallery wall; it's sort of stud wall and plasterboard wall I think ... Then there's a wall painting that's made with vinyl paint ... On top of that, the more concentrated detailed areas, that are more like excerpts of pieces of architecture, they were all made with Lascaux Studio acrylics.

It is significant that Paterson describes the wall itself as a material. The wall is not simply the place of its display, its institutional setting; the wall is manifestly part of the work's structure. This is not to say that *Black Elegy* is forever indebted to that particular wall.<sup>33</sup> On the contrary, the wall painting was whitewashed during deinstallation at the end of 2011 and was repainted in a different configuration and location within Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art the following year. Only three of the six autonomous elements were included in *Black Elegy (version 2)* (as titled on the label) (Figure 5). During our interview in 2009 Paterson explained his wariness of displaying some of the individual elements as standalone pieces, explaining that 'the wall painting and the painted elements of the wall painting are actually the sort of focal points and almost some of the other elements are sort of supporting pieces'. Interestingly, the two wall paintings, *Sunlit Emergency Exit* (Figure 6) and *Axonometric Façade with Red Cross* (Figure 7), are not included in *version 2*, while *Grey and Red Relief* is (Figure 8). Paterson described that small wooden-relief work as a 'supporting piece', which he explained, along with other 'supporting pieces', would 'dwindle in terms of their meaning and even their impact visually in terms of their ideas' if extracted from their intended situation, namely as a constituent part of a greater whole. It is perhaps significant that at this time, the work is fundamentally contingent to Paterson as only he is able to paint these autonomous wall paintings. The 'background' painting could theoretically be executed by the gallery's technical staff or by assistants who Paterson has employed in the past, but no-one other than Paterson is 'qualified' to implement the painted details. In this instance of reinstallation Paterson was able to be hands-on, mapping out and painting the background design. Yet he was short of time, which perhaps explains why the standalone elements did not include *Sunlit Emergency Exit* and *Axonometric Façade with Red Cross*. In this case, the context of the wall (and perhaps the background wall painting) could be described as the work's material structure, which embodies the work's aesthetic and functional structures, to use Laurenson's terms.

## Beyond the dichotomy

However, *Black Elegy* also illustrates the importance of not adhering dogmatically to binaries. While the wall functions as a material structure for the work, it also contributes to the artist's more metaphorical communication. The wall is not only a substrate, but also a direct and literal connection



Figure 7 Toby Paterson, *Axonometric Façade with Red Cross*, 2004, acrylic paint. (© CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection, courtesy the artist.)

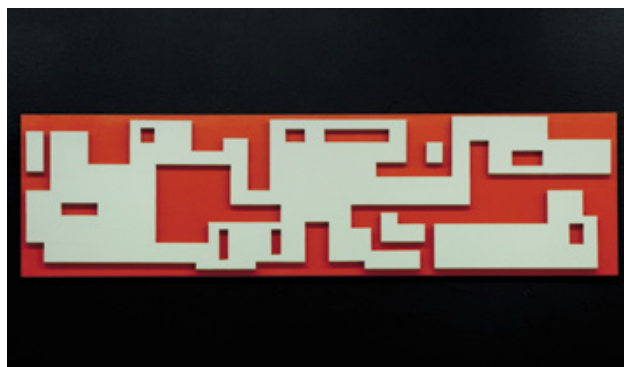


Figure 8 Toby Paterson, *Grey and Red Relief*, 2004, acrylic paint, MDF. (© CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection, courtesy the artist.)

with the 'real world', a notion that Paterson seeks to explore in his work:

The whole point of making the wall paintings is that it corresponds to this desire to not – as an artist and with the work – be hermetically sealed from the outside world; I want to have a dialogue with that ... Inevitably it's metaphor because you're still working within a gallery, but the idea of actually responding to [hits the wall] ... you're hitting the real world as it were. Working directly on the wall there's always a very distinct dialogue with the architecture in the space, in terms of locating a work particularly.

This preoccupation with the relationship between abstraction and reality stems from Paterson's interest in post-war architecture, the St Ives School of Modernists (in particular Victor Pasmore and Ben Nicholson) and the pragmatic approach of the British Constructivists. He sees cities and buildings as spaces to navigate and 'a series of surfaces to isolate and present in his paintings'.<sup>34</sup> In transcribing and exploring the 'lost dreams' of post-war Modernism directly on architectural canvases he is not only questioning these structures as icons but is also challenging the status of artists in the wider social context. Again, Fiske's warning about using 'an oversimplified or bifurcated vocabulary' chimes with the application of material 'structure' and

‘signifier’ if done so uncritically. Instead these material functions should be used as a starting point for understanding the construction and dynamic of the artwork’s identity, which will then inform reinstallation and conservation decision-making.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to highlight the importance of discerning the identity of an artwork before reinstallation or conservation strategies are negotiated. It has been taken as read that an artwork has multiple attributes (material, aesthetic, concept, function, process, context), each of which has a value within the work. The correct weighting of these values, determined by the artist, leads to the intended communication. Understanding this composite identity is therefore vital as the work’s ‘authenticity’ is at stake.<sup>35</sup> An artwork’s material attribute has traditionally been preferred during the process of conservation, stemming from conservation’s codes of ethics and the post-war value of scientific objectification. Van Wegen outlined in 1999 that:

Current codes of ethics underline Brandi’s viewpoint that, in order to preserve an art work, the existing material object should be saved as far as possible, that conservation interventions in the art work should be kept to a minimum and then only to maintain the work as a material object – as a conveyor of information and as a source for continually changing interpretations.<sup>36</sup>

This presupposition has been challenged in relation to the conservation of contemporary art, which has seen documentation of the artwork becoming of central concern with the conservator managing change rather than direct material intervention per se.<sup>37</sup>

Yet the material attribute of a contemporary work of art still holds significance, not least because it is a work of *visual* art: the work is most often approached by an audience through its physical presence (or intended absence), which may hold the key to its other attributes. It is therefore important to identify the significance of an artwork’s materials and the role they play in the construction of the work. Are they chosen because they support the artist’s conceptual expression or simply because they fall within a budget and are appropriate for the job? Are the materials intended to be an end in themselves, appreciated for their inherent qualities, or were they chosen for their associative values? Perhaps they simultaneously encompass both. The artist Neil Clements comments, ‘for me, there are just materials which either have a symbolic meaning or else there are materials which have a sort of practical meaning’.<sup>38</sup> These questions have become even more important within the expanded practice of contemporary artists where everything and anything could be considered a material. Even when the same materials are adopted by different artists, a unifying interpretation of these materials is unlikely,

as was explored in the cases of ‘people’ and ‘context’ as materials. Therefore in using the notions of materials as ‘structure’ and ‘signifier’ the function of an artwork’s material attribute may be investigated and determined. This observation, it is hoped, will aid the decision-making process for the reinstallation and conservation of contemporary art.

## Appendix: Artist biographies and interview details

### Aileen Campbell

b.1968 Greenock, Scotland

Interviewed by Rebecca Gordon 20 October 2009, Glasgow Metropolitan College, North Hanover Street, Glasgow

Campbell’s work operates at the point of intersection between visual art, performance and sound, producing what she calls ‘voiceworks’. She is interested in the interaction of the pitched voice with specific spaces, often describing and translating such spaces through a physically engaged exploration (for example, jumping on a trampoline while singing a Vivaldi aria). These voiceworks are framed using a language of visual documentation. She is a former chorister and a vocal performer of the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra. Campbell’s solo exhibitions have taken place at institutions such as Tramway, Glasgow (2009), Artis den Bosch, Hertogenbosch (2008), Dundee Contemporary Arts, Dundee (2008), Transmission, Glasgow (2007), and Gimpel Fils, London (2006). She has recently been selected for a three-year artist residency ‘High-North’ between Newcastle, Glasgow and Tromsø (Norway).

### Justin Carter

b.1973 Nairobi, Kenya

Interviewed by Rebecca Gordon 5 February 2010, Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow

Carter encourages a direct experience of the outdoors in order to question the more institutionalised sites of display such as the gallery and museum. He does this by placing central concern on the process of making and the generation of ideas, which is often embodied in New Technology and work with a performative element. He is particularly interested in sustainability, ecology and art. Carter has exhibited across the UK and internationally (recently in Australia and New Mexico), and has been artist in residence at Tate Liverpool (2001), Grizedale (2002) and Berwick Gymnasium (2004). In 2008 he completed a Bright Sparks Fellowship *Renewable Devices for Art and Ecology* and was commissioned by Rogaland Kunstsenter to develop a new public project for the Stavanger Biennale (2008). He has been a lecturer in Sculpture and Environmental Art at the Glasgow School of Art since 2003.



**Toby Paterson**

b.1974 Glasgow, Scotland

Interviewed by Rebecca Gordon 26 January 2009, Paterson's studio, The Modern Institute, Robertson Street, Glasgow

Paterson's work is informed by post-war architecture, the St Ives School of Modernists (particularly Ben Nicholson, Victor Pasmore and Berthold Lubetkin) and the pragmatic approach of the British Constructivists. His abstract murals and acrylic objects question the reality of Modernism's tenets, revealing their fundamental flaws. Paterson's perspective as a skateboarder, used to encountering the derelict shells of this utopia, adds a unique reading and challenge to the ideals of Modernist architecture that became so embroiled in controversy. He has exhibited in institutions such as the Royal Scottish Academy (2011), The Modern Institute, Glasgow (2010, 2009), The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh (2010), Galerie Kentworthy Ball, Zurich (2009), Sutton Lane, London (2007), and Tate St Ives, Cornwall (2004). He has received many public commissions: Powder Blue Orthogonal Pavilion, part of the Portavilion project in London; 'Poised Array', a work made for the BBC Scotland Headquarters in Glasgow; a work for the facade of the Home Office, Marsham Street building, London. Paterson was also appointed lead artist on the extension to the Docklands Light Railway for the London Olympics in 2012.

**Acknowledgements**

Many thanks to Aileen Campbell, Justin Carter and Toby Paterson, and the other artists interviewed for this research (Claire Barclay, Karla Black, Christine Borland, Neil Clements, Nick Evans, Will Maclean, Ross Sinclair, Lucy Skaer and students at the Glasgow School of Art). Thanks also to Ben Harman and Sean McGlashan, Curators of Contemporary Art at Glasgow Museums, Winnie Tyrrell, Photo Library Co-ordinator at Glasgow Museums, and Polly Smith, Senior Conservator at Glasgow Museums. Particular thanks to Dr Tina Fiske for helpful discussions and encouragement along the way.

**Notes**

1. A. Kaprow, 'The legacy of Jackson Pollock' (1958). In J. Kelley (ed.), *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. Berkeley, CA and London, University of California Press, 2003: 8–9.
2. R. Gordon, *Rethinking Material Significance and Authenticity in Contemporary Art*, unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Glasgow, 2011.
3. C. Scheidemann, 'Material as language in contemporary art'. In S. Melville (ed.), *The Lure of the Object*. Williamstown, MA, Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, 2005: 75–8, 76.
4. C. Greenberg, 'Modernist painting'. In C. Harrison and P.J. Wood (eds), *Art in Theory, 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2003: 775.
5. C. Greenberg, 'Avant-garde and kitsch'. In Harrison and Woods 1939: 541.
6. J. Kosuth cited in P. Crowther, *The Language of Twentieth-Century Art: A Conceptual History*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1997: 175.
7. L. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. Berkeley, CA and London, University of California Press, 1997: vii.
8. 'The Glasgow Miracle' is currently the subject of an AHRC-funded research project by the Glasgow School of Art in partnership with CCA (Centre for Contemporary Arts) that seeks to investigate and reflect upon 'the causes and conditions which encouraged the renaissance of the visual arts in Glasgow since the late 1970s'. The research team, led by Francis McKee and Ross Sinclair, will organise existing archival material from the Third Eye Centre and CCA and conduct a series of interviews with artists and art workers to construct an archive for future investigators. For more information see <http://glasgowmiracle.blogspot.co.uk/p/about-project.html> (accessed 26/09/12).
9. R. Sinclair, Interview with Rebecca Gordon, digital video and audio recording, Kilcreggan, Argyll, 14 November 2008.
10. A. Campbell, Interview with Rebecca Gordon, digital video and audio recording, Glasgow, 20 October 2009. All subsequent quotations by Campbell come from this interview transcript, unless otherwise stated.
11. R. Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the image'. In S. Heath (ed. and trans.), *Image, Music, Text*. London, Fontana Press, 1977: 32–51.
12. E. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*. Oxford, Westview Press, 1972.
13. D. Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*. London, Routledge, 2002: 140.
14. T. Paterson, Interview with Rebecca Gordon, digital video and audio recording, Glasgow, 26 January 2009. All subsequent quotations by Paterson come from this interview transcript, unless otherwise stated.
15. P. Laurensen, 'Developing strategies for the conservation of installations incorporating time-based media with reference to Gary Hill's *Between Cinema and a Hard Place*', *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, 40 (3), 2001: 259–66.
16. Reproductions of this work are well represented in the following publications: A. Temkin, 'Strange Fruit'. In M.A. Corzo (ed.), *Mortality Immortality? The Legacy of 20th-Century Art*. Los Angeles, The Getty Conservation Institute, 1999: 45–50; M. Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, MA and London, MIT Press, 2005: 146–7.
17. Temkin 1999: 47.
18. Z. Leonard cited in S. Hochfield, 'Sticks and stones and lemon cough drops', *ARTnews*, 101 (8), 2002; [http://www.artnews.com/issues/article.asp?art\\_id=1183](http://www.artnews.com/issues/article.asp?art_id=1183) (accessed 20/02/08).
19. J. Ippolito, 'Accommodating the unpredictable: the Variable Media Questionnaire'. In A. Depocas, J. Ippolito and C. Jones (eds), *Permanence Through Change: The Variable Media Approach*. Montreal and New York, Guggenheim Museum Publications and the Daniel Langlois Foundation of Art, Science and Technology, 2003. Ippolito is a coordinator of the Variable Media Network, initiated in 2001 by the Guggenheim Museum, New York, in partnership with the following founding members: The Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archives, Berkeley; Franklin Furnace, New York; Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science, and Technology, Montreal; Performance Art Festival + Archives, Cleveland; Rhizome.org, New York; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. For more information and case studies see: <http://www.variablemedia.net>.

20. T. Fiske, 'Authenticities and the contemporary artwork, or between stone and water', *VDR Beiträge zur Erhaltung von Kunst- und Kulturgut*, 2, 2006: 34–9, 36.
21. Fiske 2006: 37.
22. J. Ippolito cited in Fiske 2006: 34.
23. J. Ippolito cited in Fiske 2006: 34; for the original context see Ippolito 2003: 47.
24. T. Fiske, 'White walls: installations, absence, iteration and difference'. In A. Richmond and A. Bracker (eds), *Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths*. Oxford, Elsevier/Butterworth-Heinemann in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 2009: 232–40.
25. D. Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1987; D. Miller, 'Artefacts and the meaning of things'. In T. Ingold (ed.), *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. London, Routledge, 2002: 396–419.
26. A. Galla, 'Authenticity: rethinking heritage diversity in a pluralistic framework'. In K.E. Larsen (ed.), *Nara Conference on Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention*. Trondheim, Tapir, 1995: 315–22, 316.
27. P. Laurenson, 'Authenticity, change and loss in the conservation of time-based media', *Tate Papers* (Autumn, 2006), available at <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/7401> (accessed 26/09/12). Kirk Pillow challenges Goodman's distinction of 'autographic' and 'allographic' in relation to the work of Sol LeWitt, asserting that this distinction is 'theoretical tyranny': K. Pillow, 'Did Goodman's distinction survive LeWitt?', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 61 (4), 2003: 365–80, 378.
28. See: R. Krauss, 'Sculpture in the expanded field', *October*, 8, 1979: 30–44.
29. I.J. Hummelen, 'The conservation of contemporary art: new methods and strategies?'. In M.A. Corzo (ed.), *Mortality Immortality? The Legacy of 20th-Century Art*. Los Angeles, The Getty Conservation Institute, 1999: 171–4, 171.
30. For the full story behind the recording see Gavin Bryars' official website: [http://www.gavinbryars.com/Pages/jesus\\_blood\\_never\\_failed\\_m.html](http://www.gavinbryars.com/Pages/jesus_blood_never_failed_m.html) (accessed 26/09/12).
31. J. Carter, Interview with Rebecca Gordon, digital video and audio recording, Glasgow, 5 February 2010. All subsequent quotations by Carter come from this interview transcript, unless otherwise stated.
32. The term 'iteration' is strongly linked with the philosophy of Derrida. He explains the concept as such: '... unity of the signifying form is constituted only by its *iterability*, by the possibility of its being *repeated* in the absence not only of its referent, which goes without saying, but of a determined signified or current intention of signification' (emphases added). J. Derrida, 'Signature Event Context'. In *Margins of Philosophy*, A. Bass (trans.). Brighton, Harvester, 1982: 318 (originally published in *Glyph*, 1977). See John R. Searle's critique of Derrida's 'Signature Event Context': J.R. Searle, 'Reiterating the differences: a reply to Derrida', *Glyph*, 1, 1977: 198–208. See also the chapter, 'Iterability, pictorial representation and beyond' in Crowther 1997: 31 and Fiske 2009.
33. For more information on the artist's role in the installation of *Black Elegy* see: P. Smith and B. Harman, 'The artist's role in the installation and future display at the Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow'. In E. Hermens and T. Fiske (eds), *Art, Conservation and Authenticities: Material, Concept, Context*. London, Archetype Publications, 2009: 217–26.
34. See Paterson's profile on the Glasgow School of Art website: <http://www.gsa.ac.uk/support-gsa/gsa-alumni/alumni-stories/p/paterson-toby/> (accessed 26/09/12).
35. For papers on the concept of multiple authenticities see, for example, Hermens and Fiske 2009. The notion of 'authenticity' in contemporary art is also addressed in the forthcoming paper: R. Gordon, 'Identifying and pursuing authenticity in contemporary art'. In E. Hermens and F. Lennard (eds), *'The Real Thing?' The Value of Authenticity and Replication for Investigation and Conservation*, London, Archetype Publications, 2014.
36. D.H. van Wegen, 'Between fetish and score: the position of the curator of contemporary art'. In I.J. Hummelen and D. Sillé (eds), *Modern Art: Who Cares? An Interdisciplinary Research Project and an International Symposium on the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art*. London, Archetype Publications, 1999: 201–9, 205. See also, C. Sease, 'Codes of ethics for conservation', *International Journal of Cultural Property*, 7 (1) 1998: 98–115.
37. Laurenson 2001: 260. The forthcoming conference *Performing Documentation in the Conservation of Contemporary Art* in Lisbon, June 2013, organised by the research project 'Documentation of Contemporary Art' and the Network for Conservation of Contemporary Art Research (NeCCAR), testifies to the importance of documentation in the conservation of contemporary art. For further case studies see, for example, T. Scholte and G. Wharton (eds), *Inside Installations: Theory and Practice in the Care of Complex Artworks*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2011.
38. N. Clements, Interview with Rebecca Gordon, digital video and audio recording, Glasgow, 18 November 2009.

### Author's address

Rebecca Gordon, History of Art, School for Culture and Creative Arts, College of Arts, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK (Rebecca.Gordon@glasgow.ac.uk)