
(Im)Materiality: on the matter of art

Amanda du Preez

Since art became self-consciously art, roughly in modern times, it has mattered literally in different modes and has come to 'matter' figuratively on divergent levels. In what follows, the ways in which art has come to matter physically are first explored in an attempt to uncover the heart of the matter, so to speak. After that the more theoretical analysis of why art 'matters' – why it has significance and what its significance may be – is examined. But firstly, and perhaps most obviously, art matters in its own materiality. In other words, it matters through the 'stuff' that it is made of or created from such as the bronze sculpture, the oil painting or the woven basket: through its materiality the art object exists physically in the world. I apply these arguments in this article to a discussion of artworks exhibited at the *Visuality/Commentary* exhibition organised in May 2008 by the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Pretoria as part of the centenary celebrations.¹

The medium and the message

If one of the leading media theorist of the twentieth century, Marshall McLuhan's dictum, namely that 'the medium is the message' holds true, how does it apply to the medium of art? Does McLuhan's statement reveal something of the matter of art by commenting on the complex relationship between the message and the medium through which it is sent? McLuhan (1994:17) explains the close relation between medium and message as follows: 'For the "message" of any medium or technology is the change in scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.' According to McLuhan, it is therefore not only a question of how the content of the message interacts with society and brings about new ideas, but, more importantly, the revolution that comes through the medium itself. In terms of art, it means that we are advised not only to judge art in terms of its content (what it means), but that we should also take into account the vehicle or materiality through which it manifests itself (how it matters). If one were to change what art was made of, in other words change its matter, then it could be surmised that art's meaning or message would literally also change.

Traditionally the art object was most revered in the cathedral and the palace, and then it found a sacred place in the enclaves of the museum and gallery. Since the twentieth century – and perhaps we should thank Marcel Duchamp and his readymade 'found objects' in particular for this – the art object can be found more or less everywhere. The fact that Duchamp could merely through 'the performative utterance of calling it 'art' (Mackenzie 2000:154), exalt an obscure and mass-produced object such as a urinal to the status of art, irrevocably changed the way we think of art. Or is it rather the reproductive and mechanical qualities of photography that has stolen the art object's 'aura', as Walter

Benjamin suggests? Benjamin (1968,1982:222) melancholically ascribes the loss of the uniqueness of the art work to reproduction: 'Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be'. Whoever is to blame, the art object has plummeted from its high platform into the everyday, as Andy Warhol's soup cans and Brillo boxes callously demonstrate.

The stuff that art was traditionally made of changed from two-dimensional canvases and panels to the ordinary and the mundane. The great divide between art and life was conquered, as the two became inseparable during the latter half of the twentieth century. The artist became a mere technician of the soul or decorative mechanic, disrobed from his Romantic spiritual and divinely inspired status. In fact, Andy Warhol aspires to the state of the machine when he quips: 'Paintings are too hard. The things I want to show are mechanical. Machines have less problems. I'd like to be a machine, wouldn't you?' (quoted in Genn 2008:sp). Clearly, Warhol no longer aspires to the revered rank of the artistic genius, but feels comfortable in the position of mere technician. It must be stressed that Warhol nevertheless aspired towards being a glorified technician in his Silver Factory.

In terms of the changes that took place in the art materials used during the latter part of the twentieth century, in some instances the artist's body became the art object or art material itself. Increasingly in the twentieth century, the art object became a transient and temporary thing, no longer a static object hanging composedly on the museum wall. The smell of turpentine and linseed oil made way for the stench of bodily odours and excrements, blood and intestines. In some of its recent manifestations, art has become quite a messy and noisy thing.

The matter that art is made of has always moved concurrently with the advancement of technologies. The self-portrait of the Renaissance would have remained invisible without the mirror's surface; the Dutch Golden Age of the seventeenth century is impossible without the corresponding development in oil painting; abstraction instructed by the industrial revolution and in the contemporary climate, new media work perhaps unrealisable without trans-national networked information technol-

ogies and global capitalism. Naturally, these trends and developments are far more complex than the glib overview I have just provided, but nevertheless, there is some obvious and traceable relation between the materiality of art and technological advancement. The materiality of art created at the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Pretoria over the last fifty years is no different and follows a similar bond with technological development. Similar advancements in technique and technology can be picked up in the trends and 'schools' of thought represented in the art created at the University of Pretoria. From the grand watercolour and oil landscapes of Nico Roos as represented at the *Visuality/Commentary* exhibition in *Landskapfantasie (Landscape Fantasy)* (2006, Figure 1), to the digital interfaces of Minette Vári's *Fulcrum* (2007, Figure 2) probing into identity; technology and its progress works in the background. There is no trend or subject represented in the centenary exhibition that cannot somehow be traced to broader technological developments. Notably, the most precipitous of these developments is the advent of new technologies and new media, which are similarly reflected in the works that formed part of the centenary exhibition.



Figure 1: Nico Roos, *Landskapfantasie (Landscape Fantasy)*, 2006. Gouache on paper. 560 x 770mm
Courtesy of artist and *Visuality/Commentary* Exhibition Catalogue (UP)



Figure 2: Minnette Vári, *Fulcrum*, 2007. Digital video still. Duration: Video 2'30" Stereo Audio 5'00" Looped. Courtesy of artist and Goodman Gallery.

The dematerialisation of art: living in the age of 'post'

The way in which art has materialised over the previous decades, or perhaps of late failed to materialise, corresponds not only with changing art materials and technology, but also with broader paradigm shifts and toppling idea worlds. As early as 1968, Lucy Lippard and John Chandler noted the steadily decline of the art object or what they termed the 'dematerialisation of art.' In this early piece, they reflect on the rise of an 'ultra-conceptual art that emphasizes the thinking process almost exclusively' (Lippard & Chandler 1968:34), and by doing so this new art process brusquely uprooted the more emotional and intuitive art making processes of the previous decades (presumably they are referring to the reign of Abstract Expressionism coming to an end). It was clear to Lippard and Chandler (1968:35, my emphasis) that the materiality of art was at risk and they caution as follows:

As more and more work is designed in the studio but executed elsewhere by professional craftsmen, as *the object becomes merely the end product*, a number of artists are losing interest in the physical evolution of the work of art. ... Such trend appears to be provoking a profound dematerialization of art, especially of art as object, and if it continues to prevail, it may result in *the object's becoming wholly obsolete*.

Since Lippard and Chandler's early reflection on the issue, there have been continuous changes in the status of the art object, specifically from material object to what is now commonly referred to as 'post-object art'² or the 'post-medium condition' (Krauss 1999:296). Perhaps we can even talk of a 'post-critical age' wherein the meaning of art is deconstructed into visual culture (cf. Brown 2003). This change also corresponds closely with changing constructs of the role of art in society and its diminutive relevance. Some even herald this change in art's status and objects as introducing a so-called 'post-historical artworld' (Danto 1998), a world in which art as art has lost its plot or broader constituting narrative. What this means in terms of the Lyotardian perspective is that art is no longer created in the prescriptive shadow of the modern meta-narrative, but has instead dispersed into smaller micro-narratives. As Arthur Danto (1993:4) suggests: 'I think of posthistorical

art as art created under conditions of what I want to term 'objective pluralism', by which I mean that there are no historically mandated directions for art to go in.' According to the post-historical resolution, many narrative options as to the problem of art are now possible: 'there is no longer a direction toward which a narrative can point' (Danto 1998:128). This means that art is hereby 'free to pursue whatever ends, and by whatever means' (Danto 1998:134) it pleases. Danto identifies this moment of liberation as the 'end of art', or at least the end to a certain modern narrative or agenda of art.³

In this regard, Fredric Jameson (1998:111) reflects (not unlike Benjamin) on the loss of 'the traditional distinctiveness or "specificity" of the aesthetic'. Through postmodern culture's enveloping net of 'aesthetization' (Jameson 1998: 111), the aesthetic domain has merged seamlessly with the commercial sphere. Art literally turned into commerce and vice versa. As a result it is no longer possible to convincingly separate commerce from art, according to Jameson. This means that whatever special attribute the aesthetic could previously claim, has now been sacrificed to the 'more-of-the-same' logic of the market. In the process, theorists such as Jameson argue that art has sacrificed its particular significance.

This state of 'powerlessness' and 'even irrelevance' (Ziarek 2002:89) of contemporary art, additionally correlates with the broader trend of 'post-corporeality' and the increasing technologised devaluation of the material world in its entirety. For many techno-scientists and cyber-optimists, matter is merely frozen information awaiting technological manipulation. Felix Stalder (2000:5) identifies this 'privileging of the immaterial over the material' as the 'ideology of immateriality.' The disdain for materiality is most fittingly manifested in the contemporary obsessions with technological enhancement (reconstructive surgery, implants) and technological transcendence (immortality, cloning, and genetic manipulation).

In coming to grips with these changes, the transformation from modernism to postmodernism, for instance, provides but one guideline. The denigration of beauty in favour of the sublime is another landslide shift that has marked the art of the twentieth century. The so-called 'linguistic turn' and the 'visual turn' also explain some of the major changes in the creation of art. By unpacking

these paradigms, the shifts in the materiality of art, or rather how art has lost its matter and, in fact, the 'dematerialization of the art object', can at least partly be unravelled.

Returning to the first half of the twentieth century, it seems that through the progression of abstraction, modernism exhausted the medium-specific possibilities of art. Ironically, this contrasts precipitously with what the advocate of the specificity of the medium and staunch defender of modernism, art critic Clement Greenberg, had in mind. Greenberg stressed the importance, and in effect the matter, of the medium of art.⁴ For him the purity of art was best conveyed not only through abstraction, but also through the specificity of the medium of art, namely painting and sculpture. Art stood at risk of losing its purity once contaminated by other media. Clearly, this medium-specificity and purity were invaded non-ceremoniously by the postmodern concern for 'context' and 'process' (Tierney 2007:51-2). Pure abstraction had to make way for the ordinary hustle and bustle of life being lived. Dethroned by conceptual artists (amongst others) who 'determined that there were no clear boundaries between the artist, the art expression and the audience' (Tierney 2007:52), the medium-specificity of art waned together with modernism's pure abstraction.

Lost matter: absolute concept

Conceptualism in art (coming into existence more or less during the late 1960s, early 1970s) brought with it the ultimate dematerialising strategy of dismantling the art object's importance by focussing on the concept instead. Through the truism 'art as idea', the concept came to matter, while the matter of art was reduced to mere documentation of the process. The art object, if such a thing remained at all, became merely a vehicle, a conveyor of the far more important aspect of the art, namely the concept. In other words, the medium or matter of art was dismissed as being of no real consequence.

The calamity and severity caused through the denial of art's materiality can perhaps best be illustrated by the circumstances surrounding the American land artist Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970). The monumental earth-



Figure 3: Anton Karstel, *108166N*, 2004
Installation, 7 x 6m
Courtesy of artist and *Visibility/Commentary* Exhibition Catalogue (UP)

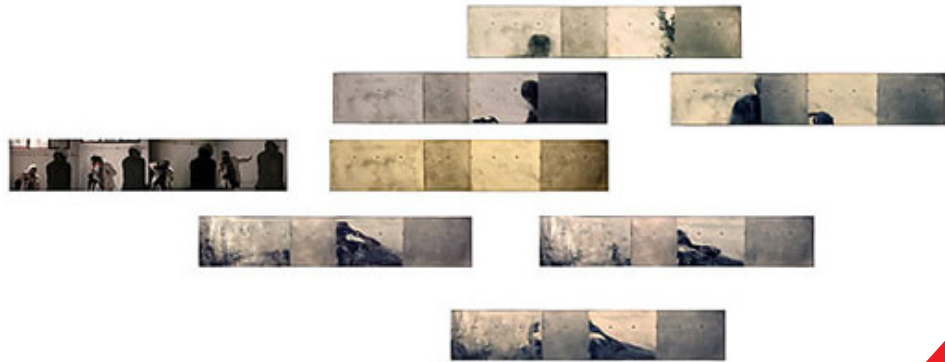


Figure 4: Guy du Toit and Carla Crafford, *Visual Dialogue*, 2007
Worked bronze, digital photography and mirrors.
Eight pieces, each approximately 222 x 1200mm
Courtesy of artists and *Visibility/Commentary* Exhibition Catalogue (UP)

work, located on the Great Salt Lake in Utah has long since been covered over by the lake,⁵ and exists only in the form of photographic documentation. As Clark Lunberry (2002:87) notes, 'it has been photography that has most powerfully, pragmatically prolonged the life and sustained the legend of Smithson and his *Spiral Jetty*'. It is thus through the existence of the photographic documentation alone that we know the work once existed: 'in the indeterminate process of its transformation, the earthwork's disappearance would seem to have inadvertently revealed a kind of post-object, post-artist art, the ontologically dispersed and now phenomenologically vanished object having broken down into its own uncertain constellation of dematerializing absence' (Lunberry 2002:97).

It is left up to the technology of photography, acting as a 'perceptual prosthetic' (Lunberry 2002:96), to create some form of presence or trace of the vanished artwork. Photography testifies (through its own materiality) to the materiality of something once present, now swamped, devoured and irrevocably lost. But mostly photography was treated by the conceptualists as a mere instrument for documentation, as becomes clear from the following comment: 'The strength of photography – its illusion of transparency – was crucial in the activity of legitimizing post-object art, for it was the chief means by which performance and installation artists memorialized transient events. It is the medium through which we now approach transitory art forms such as those of Christo and Jeanne-Claude' (Green 1999:14). This means that photography was treated as a transparent medium that did not contribute to the art process itself: 'Due to its apparent immediacy, photography was an apt medium with which to pursue this idea-driven art' (Soutter 1999:8).

Evidently the role of photography as mere recorder has subsequently changed and photography has surpassed the role of mere tool to become the art object itself. Anton Karstell's photographic documentation *108166N* (2004, Figure 3) at the *Visuality/Commentary* exhibition may specifically act as an example of this changed status of photography, as does the *Visual Dialogue* (2007, Figure 4) created between Carla Crafford's and Guy du Toit's work. In both cases, photography no longer plays the dutiful role of technological handmaiden, but has emancipated itself to the status of autonomous art object.

Freed from the dictum of the referent, photography can now find signification through reference to other signifiers, endlessly drifting on the sea of signifiers. In Karstell's installation, a police vehicle is dissected and flattened-out on the floor through a collage of photographs. The vehicle is scarcely recognisable as each image multiplies and threatens to explode into several directions. The referent shares no privileged relation to the photograph, in fact, if anything the referent, is surmounted, crossed out, overtaken.

It is not without good reason then that Edward Shanken (2002:433) emphasises the close correspondence between the development of conceptual art and the 'intensive artistic experimentation with technology' and the 'increasing "dematerialized" forms' that this coalition takes. Shanken (2002:438) explicates the coalition as follows:

Advances in electronics, computing and telecommunications – and especially the advent of the Internet – have provided tools that enable artists to interrogate the conventional materiality ... of art objects in ways that were not available 30 years ago.

Technological advances, as already alluded to, thus impact unequivocally on art's matter and how art matters. In the wake of these advances new meanings for art are created, while new possibilities are explored. Under the banner of new media, 'mostly used for digital arts in various forms' (Paul 2002:471), the artist has formed an alliance with technology. Obviously, 'digital art did not develop in an art-historical vacuum, and incorporates many influences from previous art movements (ranging from conceptual art to Fluxus and mail art)' (Paul 2002: 472). This indicates that as the material that art is made of changes, the concept of what art is also changes. Put bluntly: the matter of art 'matters', or phrased in McLuhanesque terms: the medium is part of the message. As the medium changes, so the message also appears to change, and Gordon Froud's *Sphere* (2008, Figure 5), constructed solely of intertwined coat hangers, amusingly embodies this changed message. Similarly, Theresa-Anne Mackintosh's *Tina* (2006, Figure 6) seduces us into believing that her life-sized dolls contain their messages seamlessly or rather that their meanings coincide happily with what they appear to be, namely shiny and soulless dolls. Yet, hiding beneath the surface (although only skin-

deep), it appears as if their self-explanatory surfaces are out to deceive. These are surfaces packed with disturbing and varying meanings (for example, is that a smile we see, a frown, a genuine emotion?), perhaps even providing a peek at the regressive uncanny that is otherwise so eagerly covered-up by consumerism's glamour. In Mackintosh's case we get the distinct feeling that the surface cannot readily contain what lies beneath.

No-where to hide

In the case of art practices developing in tandem with conceptualism, such as performance art and body art, the artist's body is used quite literally as artistic material and formed part of the use and experimentation of new materials after 1945. Although the University of Pretoria's Visual Arts Department never became a beacon of performance art, the tradition of performance art provides an interesting resistance to dematerialisation, as posed by conceptualism for instance. The reason for this resistance resides in the fact that the body cannot be fully consumed or used during the art activity since 'there remains a part which stubbornly resists being used in the way paint, marble, soil or felt are manipulated in the artistic process' (Zimmerman 2002:27). The body as art matters and continues to matter as it resists complete appropriation. It is particularly through the exploration of pain that the limits of representation and conceptualisation are tested and refused by the dense materiality of the body. It is almost as if, especially in some performance and body art of the 1970s, by using pain the body is given back to itself and returned to its own materiality (Zimmerman 2002:36).

Naturally the onslaught of multiple 'scopic regimes' (Jay 1993) brought about by the advances of new technologies, leave the body and materiality in effect, vulnerable and open to assimilation. Corporeality – perhaps the last bastion of materiality left in the posthuman age – is turned into a spectacle, mercilessly exposed in the 'drama of an aesthetic of disappearance' (Virilio 2003:45). The body is flayed open like a carcass ready for dissection, the interior externalised in an attempt to show the 'impotence' of dead matter, as Rina Stutzer's painting *Swarming: fever, flight and yoke* (2006, Figure 7) so skillfully depicts. The bifurcated logic between inside and

outside is here stretched to its limits, until finally, the skin which forms the surface and at least mercifully creates the illusion of depth, implodes on itself. In Mark Taylor's (1997:18) words, 'depth is but another surface, nothing is profound' as the hide has nothing left to hide, so to speak. We do not have to fear, however, that all things will become superficial: 'to the contrary, in the absence of depth, everything becomes endlessly complex', Taylor (1997:18) assures us. And in that endless matrix of complexity where all things have become mutable on the computer screen, the skin provides no hiding place or solace anymore. In this regard Rossouw van der Walt's perplexing sculpture entitled *Reconstruction of a female monologue on unpredictability* (2007, Figure 8) evokes a destabilising process between inside and outside; fragment and whole. Similarly, in Johan Thom's video projection *Birth of a tyrant* (2007, Figure 9) the confessional modus of reality television devours all difference between inside and outside, nothing remains hidden and all is exposed to the tyrannical gaze of the ever vigilant viewer.

Concrete universalism

Increasingly, as part of postmodernism's linguistic and visual turn, we see how the material signifier is loosened from the conceptual signified. Translated into deconstructive jargon, it can be stated as the problematic conflation of materiality into linguistic *différance* (Economides 2005:87). Phrased differently: how that which art is made of, its matter, no longer matters, in what it means or attempts to mean. The concept, the idea reigns supreme. Once again it is Arthur Danto (1986:111) who describes the eclipse of the art object by theory in no uncertain terms:

[I]f we look at the art of our recent past . . . what we see is something which depends more and more upon theory for its existence as art, so that theory is not something external to a world it seeks to understand, so that in understanding its object it has to understand itself. But there is another feature exhibited by these late productions which is that the objects approach zero as their theory approaches infinity, so that virtually all there is at the end is theory, art having finally become vaporized in a dazzle of pure thought

about itself, and remaining, as it were, solely as the object of its own theoretical consciousness.

Although Danto's analysis echoes Hegelian sentiments, we are warned by Hegel (whom many claim as the precursor of conceptualism in art), surprisingly, that any idea without some form of concreteness, is in fact a bad idea. In his deliberations on art as a form of embodied thinking, Hegel interprets the art work as a 'concrete universalism' (Desmond 1986:21). In other words, according to Hegel, we cannot understand the artwork as mere arbitrary particularity or incommunicable universality, but as something that concretises the universal and thus, it should be understood as a concrete universalism. Likewise, Arthur Danto (1998:130) admits that an 'artwork ... embodies its meaning', which is to say that a concrete artwork is a specific embodiment of the universal.

If art were to lose its matter completely it would no longer function as such, and if art were to become brute matter (mindless immanence without universal meaning) it would accordingly become meaningless. As William Desmond (1968:26-27) concurs: 'The universal cannot be separated from the concrete precisely because the latter is the very process of its emergence and formation. Concreteness is not exhausted by particularity because the particular is precisely a particular manifestation of the universal.' Neither extreme (universalism or particularity) seems workable or desirable. Although one must add that minimalism and conceptual art have tasted and tested the borders of incommunicable universalism, other art forms such as Pop Art and performance art have verged on the immanently insignificant. For art to matter as a meaningful social construct it needs to be concretised on some level, while simultaneously embodying universal significance. Art matters through its very particular embodied locality, while simultaneously being transposed into universal applicability.

Thinking objects

In terms of art's dual local/universal existence, Pedro Erber (2006:3) unpacks the possibility of exploring art objects as 'theoretical objects', precisely because they are able to 'interfere in the way we think'. The concept of the 'theoretical object' is analogous to Hegel's notion of the

'concrete universalism'. In fact, art objects 'embody their own theory' (Erber 2006:8) or in Danto's (1998:137) terms, artworks are 'about what they embody' – they are quite literally thinking objects because they combine both particularity and universality. Erber (2006:8), paraphrasing another theorist adds, '[a]rt thinks, but it thinks *aesthetically*'. Let me try to explain this anomaly. Art works, understood as theoretical objects, resist easy translation into narratives and language, since they continue to hold their own (materiality). Here Guy du Toit's series of bronze light fittings entitled *Trappe van vergelyking (Degrees of comparison)* (2008) and Johann van der Schijff's *Hemelbesem (Heaven's broom)* (2005, Figure 10), for instance, comply effortlessly as thinking objects with their humour and audacity. Berco Wilsenach's *Astrodeiktikon* (2007, Figure 11) operates in a similar vein, depicting a cosmic night sky that incorporates and communicates its concept so beautifully, that one cannot but 'think aesthetically' when engaging with the work.

If one wants to engage with art objects one requires what Erber (2006:8) terms 'a transformation in the interpretive approach', because what art means 'is not immediately translatable into conceptual discourse'. Art's meaning resides in and through its materiality. Therefore, conceptual art's attempt to wring the concept from its materiality can be argued not to be a very successful aesthetic solution. Instead of following a process of dematerialisation (as followed by conceptualism), perhaps vital art does not create conceptual as opposed to material objects, but rather invests in objects that are 'conceptual in their very materiality' (Bal 2001:84). Martin Seel (1998:110) explains the enigma of art's seemingly opposing components: it plays with 'the literality of the visible and with the materiality of the mental.' In other words, art that does not attempt to sever concept and matter is perhaps the best example of 'thinking objects'.

If one unpacks the concept of the 'thinking object' further it indicates that art speaks through its materiality because it simply cannot do otherwise. Danish art critic and curator Jacob Lillemose (2005:sp) provides an interesting twist to the dematerialisation argument of the art object:

[I]nstead of understanding dematerialization as a negation or dismissal of materiality as such, it can be comprehended as an extensive and funda-



05

Figure 5: Gordon Froud, *Sphere*, 2008.
Coat hangers, 3m high
Courtesy of artist and *Visuality/Commentary*
Exhibition Catalogue (UP)



06

Figure 6: Theresa-Anne Mackintosh,
Tina, 2006.
Fibreglass. 152 x 55 x 50cm
Courtesy of artist and *Visuality/*
Commentary Exhibition Catalogue (UP)



07

Figure 7: Rina Stutzer,
Swarming: fever, flight and yoke, 2006.
Oil on canvas, 200 x 140cm
Courtesy of artist and *Visuality/Commentary*
Exhibition Catalogue (UP)



08

Figure 8: Rossouw van der Walt,
Reconstruction of a female monologue on
unpredictability, 2007.
Cast marble, steel. Life-size 1,7m
Courtesy of artist and *Visuality/*
Commentary Exhibition Catalogue (UP)



Figure 9: Johan Thom, *Birth of a tyrant*, 2007.
 Looped two channel video projection. 3min 27 sec
 Courtesy of artist and *Visuality/Commentary* Exhibition Catalogue (UP)



Figure 10: Johann van der Schijff,
Hemelbesem (Heaven's broom), 2005.
 Galvanised and painted mild steel,
 stainless steel, aluminium, brass,
 wood, bristle, plastic,
 rubber 272 x 138 x 100cm
 Courtesy of artist and *Visuality/*
Commentary Exhibition Catalogue
 (UP)



Figure 11: Berco Wilsenach, *Astrodeiktikon*, 2007.
 Velvet cushions, pins and staplers. 1470 x 970mm
 Courtesy of artist and *Visuality/Commentary*
 Exhibition Catalogue (UP)

mental rethinking of the multiplicity of materiality beyond its connection to the entity of the object. [...] In opposition to the understanding that dematerialization implies an aesthetic according to which the conceptual is superior to, or overdetermines, materiality I interpret dematerialization as an aesthetics in which the conceptual is always already material. This aesthetics suggests a new interdependent and open exchange between the conceptual and material dimension of art: In setting materiality free from the object – and the philosophical discourse, power structures and aesthetic paradigms of pure visuality surrounding it – the notion allows us to comprehend materiality as a potential predisposed for continuous conceptual coding, organization, distribution, contextualization and interpretation.

It can therefore be deduced that art is not a question of a concept stuck in matter that is dying to get out, but always the 'intersection of concept and materiality' (Erber 2006:12) through which art is realised. This means that art requires a material instantaneous expression in order to exist. It gives form to something that would not otherwise have been able to take form or shape, not in any other textual or aesthetic format. In this way art provides a unique vehicle or opportunity to communicate through the materiality of its own medium. Losing the medium along with its materiality (through complete translation or conceptualisation, for instance), would be to miss the opportune event created through art's specificity.

So when Arthur Danto (1998:138) states that '[f]or art to exist there does not even have to be an object to look at', he fails the material significance of art in my view. Danto seeks the meaning of art solely to be found in a theoretical or philosophical concept, but as Martin Seel (1998:108) argues so convincingly in response to Danto:

If one aims at a philosophical definition of art as Danto does, it would be sufficient to give just one example of an artwork which has been fully emancipated from visuality. Here, indeed, where we would have a work of visual art without anything relevant to be looked at, visuality would have dropped away. But there is no such work of art, at least not as far as I know.

I concur with Seel that I do not know of an artwork either that could leave its visuality/materiality completely

behind, something always remains (even if it is just a text) to be looked at. Taking the risk of falling into some form of 'visual essentialism'⁶ on this precise point (by favouring the visual and qualifying it as a unique text grounded in the visual), I might add that art as a medium is not exclusively visual, but intersects seamlessly with other media such as the tactile, haptic, auditory and olfactory. According to WJT Mitchell (2005:257), there are no pure visual media as such: 'On closer inspection, all the so-called visual media turn out to involve the other senses (especially touch and hearing). All media are, from the standpoint of sensory modality, "mixed media"'. Naturally, Mitchell undermines any concept of media purity or specificity as in the case of Greenberg who tried to uphold pure art. Mitchell does not, however, deny the materiality of the art object, for if all media are mixed from the start it follows logically that art evokes all the sensory modalities.

Conclusion

That an art object exists, something one can touch, see and interact with materially (even on screen), is part of the reason why art matters, both literally and figuratively. The fact that art objects uniquely embody their messages through the ways in which they have come to matter, also on screen, contributes to their significance even in an age where the material realm is considered to be an outdated mode of existence. Art matters.

Notes

- 1 Fine arts has been taught at the University of Pretoria since 1955.
- 2 Note that a specific art movement pertinently called the Post Object Art was founded in New Zealand and Australia during the 1970s with artist Jim Allen as leading figure. When the term post-object art it used here it does not necessarily refer to this New Zealand and Australian movement.
- 3 See Arthur Danto (1997) and the special edition of *History and Theory* 1998 37(4) that is dedicated to a discussion on Danto's concept of the "end of art".
- 4 See in this regard Clement Greenberg (1940).

- 5 The earthwork has appeared again in 1994 and the event was documented. See Clark Luneberry (2002).
- 6 See in this regard the extended argument formulated against the problems associated with visual essentialism in Mieke Bal (2003).

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