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The significance of materials in modern painting

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THE
SIGNIFICANCE OF MATERIALS
IN MODERN PAINTING

A thesis submitted in (partial) fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF CREATIVE ARTS

from

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by

BARRY GAZZARD N.D.D. MCA(W'gong)

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Synopsis

This thesis looks at the changes in attitude towards the oil painting surface during the course of Modernism. The analysis focuses on the brushstroke, surface and the incorporation of materials into traditional oil painting techniques which culminated in the use of natural materials (pollen, beeswax) simply presented seemingly without artifice. Developments related to the use of materials brought about fundamental changes to the practice and perception of painting. Materials and their use have been used as a signifier for various perceived deficiencies of contemporary society, and particularly the surface, is seen as a signifier of nature. The motif of the natural recurs as a theme of opposition to culture and is articulated by those artists most concerned with an emphasis on materiality and surface.

Surface materiality not only changes the way a painter works but also has a profound influence on the reception of the work. The nature of the surface elicits a reciprocal relation between painter and viewer. Certain characteristics of materiality expose meanings beyond that of visuality. Surface merges seeing and touching and hence encourages a more intuitive interpretation. In this thesis, the different ways a surface can be worked are examined in relation to meaning, reception and creative process. Broad categories of the surface involve transparent, expressive, constructed, material and unworked. All these categories engender different methods of working and provoke different meanings or readings.

Painting involves marking the surface in some way and for many painters the change from inert material to something of cultural value may be seen as a mystical or alchemical transformation. The relationship painters have with materials and their meanings seen to be inherent in their use will be analysed, both from the viewpoint of painters and critics.

If the viewer’s attention is shifted from the representational illusion to sensual object then attention is also shifted to the physical process the painter undertakes in the construction process. An emphasis on process often goes hand in hand with an enhanced value placed upon the materials and the maker’s subjective experience in working with
them.

In mid Nineteenth century France, painters like Delacroix challenged the hierarchical cultural values expressed in painting together with the notion of a painting being a window on an ideal world. Later, at the beginning of the C20th the papier collé of Braque and Picasso raised the importance of the constructed surface.

Within Modernism the notion of the expressive in painting is closely linked to ideas of the primitive, colour and an idiosyncratic method of paint application. The experience of working directly from nature, African and other tribal art, further encouraged the expressive tendency. The viewer's Modernist experience inclines towards being characterised by a tangible, multifaceted immediacy at the expense of a concern for the illusionistic image.

The flourish of interest in materiality after World War II led to the use of non traditional art materials which, together with accidental marks like graffiti, reflected a rejection of European fine art painting tradition. There was a sense of starting again, symbolically using everyday building materials and non cultural methods. In America, artists such as Pollock, began to use commercial paints and were concerned with an exploration of the self.

Finally raw materials are now used without significant alteration by the painter. Materials presented as close to their natural state as possible, and in a popular sense, allowed to speak for themselves. Materials used in this way suggest in turn, an illusion of a total absence of artifice and process has all but disappeared.
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An emphasis on the brushstroke in nineteenth century French painting was part of a change of approach to painting that led it away from the tonal modulation of form to a greater emphasis on materiality and the surface. This realignment of emphasis brought about fundamental changes to the practice of painting. It foregrounded the use of materials in painting until they became a dominant part of the work. Process, surface, materiality and the painter's bodily actions assumed a larger creative role and in so doing allowed the exploration of new meanings in painting.

The thesis commences by contrasting differing attitudes of painters and critics towards painting's materials. Discussion of painting often tends to be centred on the finished product, for artists working the materials are a fundamental area of fascination. Much contemporary criticism tends to gloss over the making process and the artist's
experience of painting. This deficiency will be examined in the light of television programs featuring Tàpies and his working methods. Tàpies will also be highlighted as the contemporary artist whose “matter” paintings most typify the post WWII use of materials/matter.

Some painters see their relationship with materials as having an alchemical or mystical nature because the ability of inert materials to move the viewer frequently seems inexplicable. Often the difference between the inert materials on a palette and those in a painting appears not all that great.

It is through the painting process that painters often realise their concepts. The process of painting directly involves the body of the painter with the materiality of the surface (as traces of the experiences of the process) and this has a considerable effect on the meaning of the work.

The next five chapters will examine different ways of working the surface and the meanings explored in this working process.

The minimal concern for surface will be investigated and contrasted with the emphatic use of the brushstroke. It will be argued that the tonally modelled painting of the French Academy placed a greater emphasis on cultural content understood through knowledge, and as such, posited the reception of the work as an intellectual exercise. Painting became more accessible to a wider audience and particularly to an audience that was not as politically powerful or culturally educated. The ability of painting to move the viewer gradually lost its strong dependence on a knowledge of cultural references, including
allegorical and classical allusions, and came to rely on insights and intuitions available to everyone.

In their effort to capture the transient immediacy of light on the landscape the Impressionists undermined the idea of composition as a preliminary and separate process. In so doing the compositional emphasis shifted away from a more content orientated composition to the techniques of painting. With the Post-Impressionists a painting came to be considered as an arrangement of blobs of paint on a surface, which accessed an area that emphasised a more instinctive response. As the expressive element became dominant elements including colour, form, texture developed into paradigms of expressivity. Painters generally, but particularly the more expressionist painters, opposed the detachment of the Academy with an immediacy of paint application which emphasised unmodified brushstrokes, raw colours and rapid execution. All these facets were reflected in the surface treatment of paint. Mimesis and the characteristics associated with it were diminished, since expressive and objective aspects of the work dominated.

After WWII many European artists began to use materials for their own sake. They frequently chose the most ordinary everyday materials as their palette. Rejecting the society which created the traumas of war, the artists went to city rubble to find the raw materials of their work. The materials were so simple and basic they were not tainted with the failures of European culture. Tàpies with his “matter paintings” came to exemplify this tendency. His paintings were the first to use non paint materials as the sole means of artistic expression.
With the addition of commercially made materials just prior to World War I, a vast range of new meanings were explored. Thin mass produced materials like newspapers shattered the traditional homogeneous integrity of the picture surface. These materials together with whole range of very different ways of thinking were brought to bear on making art. These additions, which required minimal skills, involved cutting, tearing and folding prior to being pasted to the surface. Such methods imply careful a priori consideration of the collage effect on the picture plane. Incorporating material objects into paintings acted to further undermine the traditional concept of a painting as a window on a world.

Finally, materials have been simply presented, as they are in nature, and hence human intervention was minimal. These materials, including blood, pollen and wax, are almost always presented in their natural state, ubiquitous but unnoticed. They are not only ephemeral but very difficult to actually manipulate. These materials tend to be presented rather than worked in an attempt to avoid any possible artifice in their use. A common aim was to allow them to be left "unmade, as if self-manifest, as if here by its own volition".

In the case of Wolfgang Laib's use of pollen, its collection depends on knowledge of a complex range of natural phenomena without which collection would have been impossible.

The philosophical basis and many of the ideas in this thesis have been heavily influenced by the phenomenologist philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Mikel Dufrenne. The emphasis on perception, experiencing a work through the process of perception and the
specific intuitions so gained are concepts expressed in phenomenology and are theoretically central to my argument. Merleau-Ponty’s writing on art is peppered with the words “embodiment” and “incarnation” to describe the painter’s relationship to the world. The painter is said to “lend his body to the world” and must also understand that “his vision is caught in things.” This thesis critically examines the ideas of “embodiment” and “incarnation” as they apply to the making and perception of painting.

1. Anish Kapoor. Germano Celant pxii
Antoni Tàpies matter paintings, for which he is best known, were commenced in the mid
1950s. These large abstract paintings were concerned partly with the empowerment of
materials, objects, traces and marks. Tàpies used materials, marble dust, varnishes and
also horsehair, sheets and straw as well as a variety of objects and impressions taken
from objects, as the medium of painting. They were not mixed with or used as a
secondary part of oil paints.

Swedish, Czech and British¹ television companies have all made documentaries about
Tàpies and his work. This amount of media interest reflects his huge success and stature
as an artist, but also the suitability of his manner of working for the medium of
television. He is a very sympathetic subject for a television documentary. His work can
be presented by the television medium in a way which is germane to the methods and characteristics of television. The strong correspondences of his work with walls, architectural ornaments, household objects etc., allow for an easy explanation of the work. Television, as a medium, has limitations of representation which mirror certain tendencies in the contemporary critical approach to painting. With television, surfaces are transparent and homogeneous. Any awareness of surface difference is cognitive rather than perceptual and experience of the surface is eliminated except on a level of information. As Merleau-Ponty, a postwar French phenomenologist, comments:

> We commit what psychologists call ‘the experience error’, which means that what we know to be in things themselves we immediately take as being in our consciousness of them. We make perception out of things perceived. And since perceived things themselves are obviously accessible only through perception, we end by understanding neither. We are caught up in the world and we do not succeed in extricating ourselves from it in order to achieve consciousness of world. ²

Paradoxically television is able to capitalise on Tàpies’ characteristic use of materials through our knowledge of them. The television medium itself, in an extreme manner, creates meaning through the way the work is presented and implies meaning, within the context of the program.

The ease with which television implies meaning allows the viewer to appreciate the
information supplied without consideration of meaning. In the BBC documentary we are shown Tàpies heaping marble dust on the edge of a large canvas, then tilting it to let it run down over an adhesive base. Thus his unusual materials become apparent and known to the viewer. Whilst this is happening, the parallels with the walls of Barcelona’s old Gothic quarter are articulated in a voice over; thus the formal similarities between a painting and architectural details are made obvious. The materiality of the paintings is thus suggested, discussed and stated in very oblique ways but it never becomes part of our experience of the work.

The visual relevance of the architectural details is explained as being relevant psychologically because of his family’s various residences within the Gothic Quarter of Barcelona. Not only the architectural details, but also the chance placement of household furniture, banisters, casements, corbelling are shown to mirror forms in his work. Typical door and window construction in the quarter are demonstrated in a manner to suggest a strong formal and instrumental relationship with his work and life. All the possible, tangible and formal relationships between elements of the quarter and forms in Tàpies work are demonstrated visually. Books frequently adopt the television format and juxtapose a work and an architectural element to emphasise the worldly reality of his sources. In all these cases the iconographic quality is emphasised as the source for an explanation-and implied meaning-at the expense of areas which are not reproducible through the medium.

Television is one of the great modern inventions which has changed all aspects of
Tapies in his studio 1969
society. David Levin questions a characteristic of the medium when he writes:

Our modern way of looking at the world made television possible. Is the technology of television now taking possession of our vision, remaking it in our own image- anonymous, mechanical, obsessed with its own images, predatory, detached from all sense of reality?  

The visual reality of television closes off many possibilities within the experience of perception and that is nowhere more evident than in relation to paintings. Television sanitises all perception, reducing areas of meaning to information presented as knowledge. Any experience that the viewer may have of the televised painting is through the colour, shape and form of already known objects. Limiting these elements also limits the possible meanings accessible through the medium. The element of painting that encompasses the importance of perception at the three stages of making, evaluating and viewing, is reduced to recognition.

Tàpies’ materials assume importance only as information about the work, the artist and how he works. Their role highlights the Modernist concept of originality and reinforces the implied meanings made visible through the references to walls. Without the voice over, however, we would have no understanding of the materials except that they are small granules. The constitution of the photograph is unable to come to terms with the texture of the real world. As powerful and as sensitive as the photograph might be, with photography we only see the medium if the film is too grainy, too coarse etc. In simple
terms, the photograph is totally transparent and converts all it is involved with through its own process of seeing. The physical reality of the photograph is only marginally experienced and the image dominates to the exclusion of the material involved in the process. Photography’s inability to depict materiality is reminiscent of the transparency of the Academic oil paintings of the 1850s and before. And it possibly played a part in the emphasis on the surface in Modernism.

The objects in the photograph are seen differently from the objects that the eye sees. The ambiguity of photographic images is connected to their inability to reveal meanings. Television confirms the advantages of the medium, the camera being able effortlessly to show the formal or visual parallels without recourse to intrusive words. The juxtaposition of an architectural embellishment and a painting by Tàpies is an immediate, obvious visual correspondence which creates a notion of insight without making anything but a marginal comment on the work. A point of reference has been made, however, between the painting and the world, and content and meaning is written large over the work.

The impression given is that Tàpies’ work is the sum of influences and interests, and/or a conduit for memories of his past. Everything in Tàpies’ work, it would imply, can be neatly traced back to an origin in his past experience and in this way the work can be explained in terms of the personality and uniqueness of the artist. The focus in this type of interpretation of paintings is on why things might have been done in a certain way and the possible causes. The limitation of this approach is similar to the diagnostic medical
interpretations that conclude that a painter saw the world in a certain way because of an optical defect or disease that skewed his or her vision, producing the distinctive style. This manner of explanation assumes that the meaning of the work can be garnered solely from biographical information. The painting becomes a springboard for a singularly information based interpretation. An information-based interpretation implies an approach which glosses over large areas of meaning.

The paradox is that all the information built up in this way has a role and does shed light on the artist, his or her way of thinking and the work itself. It only becomes a difficulty when these elements oust the experience of the work, and the information gained from encountering the work, from their roles in realising meaning. As noted, his materials and the way they are used signalled a significant shift in Tàpies’ development. The matter paintings are the basis for his reputation and his unique contribution to European art. Thus, to gloss over the materials is to also diminish the making of the work and meanings implicit in the making. Materiality and materials were of crucial importance to Tàpies’ development and were decided upon after a long period of introspection. Yet the ramifications of his decision can only be referred to, not demonstrated by, the medium of television. This situation parallels an aspect of contemporary criticism which plays down the process and materiality of the painting.

A painting is an object made over time and in a medium that subtly gives expression to the body’s realised meanings. An appreciation that considers the painting as an icon of recognition within information technology not only misses much of the meaning, but
ignores one of the central tenets of the work. Recognition is the naming or categorisation of an object that facilitates entry into the realm of the language of information. George Steiner wrote:

> It is indicative of the stylistic and intellectual climate now predominant of the era of theory, that the personal phenomenality of the encounter with music, literature and the arts is largely left inarticulate. Current critical theory in its investigations of significant form finds almost nothing to say of the literal facts of our experience of the poem.⁵

Any experiential or participatory element in viewing a work must necessarily be absent from the mechanical eye of the television camera. The experience of viewing is part and parcel of the viewing of any original work, but not a viewing codified by a theoretical position that “finds almost nothing to say of the literal facts of our experience.” The absence of experience, which includes the experience of making, limits the understandings and meanings gleaned from the encounter to one area of being.

The link with the world seen through the eye of television is very apparent. The projected images allow only minimal participation in the actuality of the work. The images can be seen and discussed dispassionately without any reaction to the work as an object. The viewer is not moved to act or react as the experience of the physical reaction to the object itself is missing. The picture evokes information as distinct from knowledge.
There are several aspects touched upon here that are integral to my own philosophical beliefs with respect to painting. My thinking on painting reflects the longstanding and profound influence of Buddhism and if for no other reason makes me immediately sympathetic to the ideas and views expressed by Tàpies. One aspect of Buddhist thought posits the transcendent firmly in the physical world. The world is not to be denied or rejected but is a manifestation of the transcendent. Texts of late Buddhism blur the differentiation between the world (passions) and the transcendent (enlightenment). The Japanese Buddhist sect of Shingon-shu clearly states "Bono soku bodai"—the passions are enlightenment. Far from postulating a prohibition of the world, it is seen as inescapable and not different from the transcendent. The analogy between the texture of the manifest world and the materiality of the painted surface is obvious.

Buddhist Yoga proposes that it is possible to inculcate states of mind through certain bodily positions. The physical and the mental state can rise above the separation that is normally experienced. Similar to the compelling of a certain mental state by the body, the body of paint functions in a parallel way. Body is not a despised or inferior mode but a treasured binary opposite inextricably intertwined with the other. To eschew one for the other is to upset an equilibrium that permits the possibility of transcendence. The binary opposites partake in transcendence without either being the limiting or dominating facet and without either of them or the sum of them being the whole of the area. Instead of being and substance there is nothing. To strive for this is to place less emphasis on information, which is associated with the manifest world, for knowledge.
Experience of the world is a constant one. There is a tendency to play down the experiential in favour of the intellect. The materiality of painting’s surface has, in twentieth century painting, come to function as a symbol. Merleau-Ponty writes: “Some think that the painting does not so much express the meaning as the meaning impregnates the painting.” It is unable to be understood solely through the use of language. Language can explain its use and its historical origins but, like the television camera, nothing of the sensory experience.

Modernist painting has not only explored the visual possibilities of materiality but, in so doing, has modified the sensibilities of viewers through the examination of hitherto unconsidered areas of experience. The expressive power of the materials of painting devoid of the subject and its cultural accumulations has, to a degree, become the subject of painting. Modernism has encouraged a way of seeing which involves the viewer in previously unacknowledged areas aesthetic experience. The act of seeing is given the time to operate before another mode of understanding takes place. Paul Valery described this time when he said poetry was “the prolonged hesitation between meaning and sound.” This is not simply a process of delaying the onset of thought. The rationale of Valery’s notion of poetry is to recognise that time be given for perception to think without categorisation and finality. This kind of perception is not limited or directed; it is just the experience of absorbing what is before one. Facets that are frequently glossed over or normally given little consideration are realised or experienced in the process.

The introduction of incorporated materials into painting constructs new areas of
meaning and significance. These new areas and the use of materials enjoyed a symbiotic relationship in which both were advanced. The materials forced the new meanings on the viewer. Neither the materials nor their use were at the forefront of the changes, nor were they instrumental in effecting them. Their use and application went hand in hand with the exploration and expression of new meanings within painting. In the process they have acquired valences and meanings that are specific to themselves. Materials have slowly ceased to be the servant of skills and techniques and have an intrinsic role and influence in the making of a painting. Their role has also developed from one of providing a transparent vehicle for the subject matter to one of being seen as an important part of the painting, in their own right. They have been used in very different ways and the underlying philosophic basis of their use varies widely.

The history of modernism is a history of concepts; primitivism, the spiritual, the unconscious, etc.. In the interpretation of these concepts, materials and materiality played a major facilitating role. Primitivism, for example, relied very much on a specific manner of handling paint which highlighted its materiality. It also subsumed several elements which, as well as being relevant to Tàpies, were part of a general tendency to link artistic creation and freedom with the concept of nature. This concept has been a major part of the oppositional nature of Modernism. The breadth and variety of nature's attributes make it tempting to regard nature negatively; namely, as not culture. This is precisely the manner in which the word is used in many of the writings of modernist artists. The attributes of nature are mostly defined as distinct from- with the meaning
altering according to the times. Nature is frequently seen as the converse or the antithesis of culture, as epitomised by the values that are attributed by painters to society, culture and the modern world.

It is noteworthy that surface materiality was given a new significance, specifically by European painters, a few short years after the trauma and devastation of World War II. Artists like Tapies and others used materials as the basic stuff of their work as if to avoid the connotations oil paints had with the culture that spawned the war. Materials were seen as the primeval stuff of creation, existing in a state that always retains its primordial or natural condition, free from the taint of change, conditioning and civilisation. It is being. It exists, prior to the overlays and forgetting inherent in classification and institutions and impervious to their influence.

The Body

In developing the hypothesis of materials and surface materiality in painting as a signifier for nature, the role of the body, will be investigated both in relation to the application of materials and also as a metaphor for nature. Since the time of Descartes the body has been widely seen as the binary opposite of mind. And so, over time, it has taken on many of the attributes of nature. The nature/culture debate has seen the acceptance of the notion along with the broad concepts that the notion implies and subsumes. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, links the body to things seen and implies that perception is not simply an ocular event:
Since things and my body are made of the same stuff, vision must somehow take place in them: their manifest visibility must be repeated in the body by a secret sensibility. "Nature is on the inside" said Cezanne. Quality light, colour, depth, which are there before us are there only because they awaken an echo in our body and because the body welcomes them.  

The manner of application is particularly important in the process of painting. The painter must work in the area between a codified cultural use and the raw materials. Applying the paint is a searching, dynamic, exploratory occupation that explores meanings often seen as not culturally conditioned. The image is a result of the process and the technique used. There are many skills and much knowledge and experience within the painting tradition that the painter is heir to. These are what Bryson\(^9\) refers to as "the codes specific to the material signifying practice of painting." The tradition of oil painting has continued without interruption to the turn of this century, but sheer weight of this tradition saw painters during that time, strive to elude its weight and rigidity. Highlighting the physicality of the surface was an important stratagem in positioning their work vis a vis the strictures of tradition. An example of this tendency can be seen in the Impressionist emphasis on the brushstroke, which distinguished their paintings from those of the painters of the French Academy.

The modernist surface has developed as the visible trace of the painter's process and all aspects of tangible physicality of the surface have been explored. Likewise the viewer has been positioned to consider and perceive painting differently. This way of perceiving
is intrinsic to a way of making which involves the whole body, and hence the application of materials has become a major factor in the appreciation of painting.

Tàpies is an example of the painters who made paintings that placed an inordinate emphasis on materials and hence freed themselves from the traditional painting process involving oil paints. Victoria Combala Dexeus sums up the intellectual parameters taken in discussing Tàpies' works when she writes;

There have been many readings of Tàpies’ work, seen as non-figurative art, which have denied it any iconographical dimension (in speaking of the dissolution of form in the material). They have enounced two typical interpretations derived from a mistaken view of the concept of matter as it applies to this painter: on the one hand we hear of it as simple presentation of physical aspects in order to make direct sensorial experiments; on the other, vaguely philosophical connotations are adduced, in which the painted material would act as "original matter" in the face of human experience. For instance Tomás Llorens is the one who has best elucidated the difference between the philosophical term and what for Tàpies is a procedure; the mixing of powdered marble with latex or other material, while others have felt tempted to absolutize the meaning of Tàpies work. Michel Tapié, for instance, speaks of “pure painting” as a reaction to a present drowned in facile decorativism: “the dramatic content of his work....does not owe anything to anecdote..., but to the act of painting in itself, the structure and texture being the sole bearers of the whole of his ineluctable message.” Juan
Eduardo Cirlot, on the other hand, alluding to the spiritualisation of matter—a feature that is quite evident in certain works by Tapies—is led by quite the contrary route to say that “Tapies knows that matter is the spirit..., which can be made manifest through structure and order.” Thus a different plane such as that of art subsumed in a philosophical statement of an idealistic kind—the external reality—would have no existence of its own except as a projection of our reason or our psyche. In the art of this Catalan painter matter would be transformed into thought become object, a notion which comes quite close to Hegel's definition of art as the tangible expression of the Idea.11

1. Antoni Tapies Omnibus/BBC Producer: Gregory Hood 50 minutes 1990
2. Phenomenology of Perception. p5. In Primacy of Perception (p6) Merleau-Ponty also wrote, “The evidence of the perceived thing lies in its concrete aspect in the very texture of its qualities, and in the equivalence among all its sensible properties— which caused Cezanne to say that one should be able to paint odors.”
3. The Opening of Vision p125
4. Optics Painting & Photography. p10-12 “The eye is the only optical instrument which forms an image which is never intended to be seen. This is the great difference between the eye and a camera.” “What the artist sees and paints on his canvas is not his retinal image, nor the stimulation pattern formed in his brain.”
5. Real Presences p177
6. From a private conversation with the Monshu of Shingon Mikkyo at the headquarters of the sect at Koyasan in Japan
7. Signs “Indirect Languages and the Voices of Silence” p55
8. Primitivism has a long history within the painting tradition, here the reference is to the developments in Europe in the early part of the century. The Fauves and the German Expressionists are typical of the tendency described.
10. Vision and Painting p16
11. Tàpies  Victoria Dexeus p16
Rhetoric of materials

You have on the floor, like cow dung in the field, this big glob of paint on the floor, and something comes off in the picture, and I look down at the stuff on the floor and it's just a lot of inert matter, inert paint. Then what is it? I look back at the canvas and it's not inert, it's active moving, and living and that to me seems like some kind of peculiar miracle that I need to have again and again. Philip Guston.

Modernist thought was infused with a strong opposition to modern industrial society. As a consequence, the last hundred and fifty years have seen almost every facet of the painting tradition examined and alternative modes developed. One facet of that opposition was revealed through the use of, and the emphasis on the rhetoric of materials and the physicality of the surface. From early nineteenth to the mid twentieth century, the materiality of elements moved from transparency in relation to the image, to an assertive and even dominant role. In this process of change painting's materials revealed new meanings, which have affected both the production and reception of painting. Material use not only engenders meanings through use but also has allowed the incorporation of meanings culturally associated with them. A large proportion of these meanings place materiality firmly within the realm of nature. Nature's dichotomous relationship with contemporary technological culture imbued it with
qualities that were seen to have been lost in the industrialisation of the world. Nature thus became symbolic of all that modern society was not and so, was frequently defined negatively. We shall see that the opposition of artificial to natural and of spiritual to material, was part of a philosophy that depended on touch and body as well as on the ambivalence towards a culturally conditioned education. These recurring themes are articulated by those artists most concerned with an emphasis on materiality and surface. Within this conceptual framework it is the primitive or simple craftsman who works empathetically with the materials, with only rudimentary tools, who is seen to make objects of beauty. This notion of “nature” postulates a person without a sophisticated education being in tune with the seasons and empathetic with materials.

The relationship painters have with materials and the meanings seen to be inherent in their use will be analysed both from the viewpoint of the painter and the critic. Although often not considered in critical comment, the relationship between painters and their materials is seminal in their analysis. Painters consider raw materials to have great significance and status. From tube to support, paint undergoes a tremendous transformation yet remains largely unaltered in substance. For the painter, experimenting with materials is a conceptual, as well as, a materially manipulative process. Painters usually place a great value on the role that materials play in making the image. Hence painters have had more to say about materials, than critics, which engenders wildly divergent views as to their pictorial function and relevance. Different viewpoints range from seeing materials as relatively inert rather than them playing a crucial role at every level of the artistic process. In the catalogue of the Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art
1992, for example, Timothy Morrell argued that:

Often these experimental qualities seem to have more to do with materials than with ideas, but this is a false distinction. The failure to appreciate how much intellectual rigour can be required in exploring the identity of art materials is symptomatic of readings of contemporary culture which makes whole areas of art inaccessible.

Reading objects on their own terms sometimes occupies a minor place in the thinking and writing about contemporary Australian art. Consciously or not we are inclined to see work in relation to something else, other art, or other ideas.¹

Because a painter’s acquisition of manipulative skills are culturally determined, it is difficult for a painter to imagine painting in any other way. For young painters the initial stimulus to paint is often through contact with another artist’s work. The work’s materiality is fundamental. It is not surprising, for example, that Tàpies showed an interest in Van Gogh as a young boy. In hindsight we could speculate that it was more the materiality and surface of the Van Goghs that stimulated him, which is borne out by his remark that: “I applied paint in an extremely heavy impasto to show my disdain for academic painting”.²

The relationship of painter, materials and concept is a very intimate. Each painter’s sense of materials is inseparable from his/her conceptual concerns and their tangible realisation. This relationship is so ingrained that it seems to be as natural as bodily movement. Materials are not inert matter to be manipulated but rather a partner or an active participant in the making process. The work is made through or because of the
materials, giving them a unique role and influence on the creative process. Every nuance and possibility of manipulation enhances conceptual expression. The matter of materials is turned into the spirit of painting, and this is achieved through the painter’s intimate and empathetic relationship with materials through their manipulation. The craft element of painting—the skill of manipulation—may have declined, but the relevance of materials has been correspondingly expanded through the desire for an expressive surface that is a trace of material execution.

Despite the high value that has been placed on materials, critical influences attributed to their use are less frequent. This reflects the critical emphasis placed on the end product rather than the process. Frequently they are regarded as a given and their role in the making is ignored. This parallels the way television coverage leaves large areas of Tàpies painting unexplored through its inability to represent the materiality of his works except through language. Clement Greenberg is one critic who has defended materiality and process and their changing roles in the history of art. In referring to a reaction against academism in painting, he wrote:

Manet meanwhile, closer to Courbet, was attacking subject matter on its own terrain by including it in his pictures and exterminating it then and there. His insolent indifference to his subject, which in itself was often striking, and his flat colour modelling were as revolutionary as Impressionist technique proper. Like the Impressionists he saw the problems of painting as first and foremost problems of his medium, and he called the spectator’s attention to this.³

Greenberg also commented that:
The arts then have been hunted back to their mediums, and there they have been isolated, concentrated and defined. It is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself. To restore the identity of an art the opacity of the medium must be emphasised. For the visual arts the medium is discovered to be physical; hence pure painting and pure sculpture seek above all else to affect the spectator physically.  

As a consequence of the rejection of academic transparency and the development of the values of opacity of the surface, painting becomes a physical experience for the viewer. A great deal of emphasis is then placed on the process the painter follows in achieving the surface materiality. The heightened awareness of surface materiality naturally encouraged the exploration of the nature of materials. Eventually, in some cases, materials became both means and ends of content.

Tàpies highlights a peculiarly modernist attitudes to materials and in an interview with Barbara Catoir, he said:

This undoubtedly has to do with the fact that I loathe the clean, polished appearance of machine made objects. I can't say why, because I don't know. Perhaps because old things are imbued with traces of humanity. The products of industry, of design, have lost all the spiritual functions which are essential to human life. Designers only think of the material use of things: if they are making a chair, for example, the only question that interests them is whether it's comfortable to sit on, ignoring the fact that it also has a spiritual function to fulfil. The crucial issue here is probably that of materials. Chrome, glass and plastic are lacking in tactile qualities, the qualities we can touch or feel with our
hands and eyes. They have no aura because unlike wood, they are inorganic and artificial. This, to me, is a massive limitation. A simple craftsman or folk-artist, using his hands, makes far more beautiful objects than someone who has studied art.  

The notion that materials are a signifier for nature could not be made more explicit: humanity; the spiritual; the tactile; aura; artificiality; the hand made; the limitations of training and technique. Each of these concepts links and interweaves with others in a fluid system that reinforces and enriches the other in quite complex ways. Tàpies stresses the links between materials and spiritual values, humanity and the “aura” of natural “organic” order. To lack tactile qualities is to be deficient spiritually. The notion of tactility is connected to the “simple craftsman or folk-artist” using his hands to make beautiful objects. All these qualities are posited as being different from or opposed to the artificiality of the “clean polished appearance of machine made objects”.

Tactility not only concerns paint quality and facture, but highlights surface sensuality which in turn influences meaning and also plays a role in shaping the viewer’s perception of the work. An example would be the Jim Dine painting “An Animal” in the Australian National Gallery. It comments through the surface facture on the sensuous surface or skin of an Abstract Expressionist painting contrasting it with a real one thus exploring the relationship between the painted surface, a real object and language.

Most of the notions expressed by Tàpies have played some part in the value systems of contemporary art movements. They constitute the loose and fluid concept of nature. It is characterised by an attempt to operate in areas of being that are different to those of accepted beliefs. To a degree the concept of nature is generally defined negatively, or as
an oppositional position to culture. Within the concept of nature, materials and materiality are mythologised as a primordial element untouched by the modern.

Many painters subscribe to what might be called the alchemical theory of materials. Buzz Spector quotes Josef Beuys as saying:

Fat .....was a great discovery for me...... I was able to influence it with heat or cold .....In this way I could transform the character of this fat from a chaotic and unsettled state to a very solid condition of form. In this way the fat underwent a movement from, a very chaotic condition to a geometrical context as its end. I thus had three fields of power and, there, that was the idea of sculpture. It was a power over a condition of chaos, over a condition of movement, and over a condition of form. 7

Although the connection with medieval alchemy is slight the belief that the materials are either transformed by or the interaction with the artist produces something new. Mircea Eliade quotes a fourteenth century work on alchemy, Summa Perfectionis, as saying “what Nature cannot perfect in a vast space of time we can achieve in a short space of time by our art.” He continues, noting that:

The Alchemist takes up and perfects the work of nature, he assists Nature to fulfil her final goal, to attain her “ideal”, which is the perfection of its progeny- be it mineral, animal or human- to its supreme ripening, which is absolute immortality and liberty.

The importance of materials is revealed as Eliade continues:
He pursued the reduction of substances to their pre-cosmogonic state. He knew that he could not achieve transmutation if he used as his starting point ‘forms’ already worn by time.  

Like the alchemist transforming a base metal into gold, the painter turns inert paint into culturally valuable objects. As simplistic as this might appear, there are strong correspondences between the alchemist and the painter. Not the least is the conjunction with the alchemical practice of empirical research - the painter’s visual history and exploration-and a supramundane aspect that is frequently assumed to be part of the process-of transforming materials into cultural values.

The parallels with the Creation of Christian theology also position the artistic creative process in a flattering supramundane light. Art has often been clothed in the language of the transcendental and belief in this concept has not totally disappeared. Art is often presumed to possess the ability to communicate universally whilst encapsulating the truest or highest values of the culture it emerges from. Alchemy was a spiritual discipline as well as a scientific endeavour and offered painters a metaphor for their craft. Donald Kuspit saw the project of Josef Beuys, an artist fascinated by transmutation and shamanism, in the following way:

The alchemical conception of art is continuous with the Expressionist conception of art. Both make Germanic medieval assumptions of art’s “religious” profundity and imply that it is the means of directed transformation of being, a transformation effected by a primordial encounter with material being as such. The alchemical conception is the root of which the Expressionist conception is the fruit. One might say that the Expressionist conception is the instrument of
Kuspit goes on to explain that:

Beuys' conception of art is spiritual alchemy as a process of transmutation of materials and personal beings... his performances mean to engender this... process...  

These associations would certainly have been endorsed by the representatives of major Expressionist movements and they underlie the general expressionist tenor of much of twentieth century art. With Academic art the paint tends to be used to depict the form of the object and through this interpretation of reality, acquires meaning. But for the expressionist, the mark reflects the spontaneous expression of a person who attains a kind of freedom through the process. The mark invariably bears the imprint of the person who made it. Paradoxically, intense personal expression in art was seen to possess a universal meaning. Rosenberg writes:

In remaking the world the avant-gardist begins by making himself. In avant-garde art the "I" of the artist is magically enhanced-art is wiped out by the discipline of objectivity. Modern art oscillates between the two poles of omnipotent identity and the selfless eye and brain. At the extremes, the enhancement of self and the elimination of self converge.  

This positions the marks of the painter as being expressive without any recourse to mimesis. This notion still falls within the domain of the traditional theological argument of the transformative spirit acting on matter. Julian Schnabel, a contemporary post expressionist artist, put forward a different, more self-reflexive position when he
responded to Démosthènes Davvetas by saying:

I am convinced that just as words and images can be inverted the same can be done with colours-white for example, can be seen as landscape or perhaps as whitewash splashed onto a wall....... What interests me is, by using the materialism of my materials, I am looking for a way of freeing them from matter itself. 

As Phillip Guston, the American artist notes, the process of making relevant marks is largely inexplicable. When paint is applied to canvas certain blobs of paint have the capacity to move us, to be a vehicle for insights and to give us great pleasure. The ability of marks to move the viewer is often independent of the content, cultural context and ideological background. The impact African sculpture made on Parisian Modernist painters such as Picasso, for example was formal or expressive rather than cultural and philosophical. A knowledge of the cultural context augments our appreciation but is not essential to the experience. Some marks also do not move us and there is no certain or single explanation for this. Painters continually experience a sense of alchemical like transformation in their daily practice of making the paint work in concordance with their concepts.

Quite frequently painters refer to their materials as animate beings with a life and personality of their own. Franz Kline talking to David Sylvester in 1963, said:

Paint never seems to behave the same. Even the same paint doesn’t. In other words, if you use the same white on black or red through the use of it it never seems to be the same. It doesn't dry the same. It doesn't stay and look at you the
same way. Other things seem to affect it. There seems to be something that you can do so much with paint and after that you start murdering it. 14

Tàpies placed a different emphasis on the role of materials when he said in an interview:

So I jot the idea down. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. It is not always possible to translate things one has imagined into pictures. The first thing one has to do is to engage in a dialogue with the materials: they speak, they have a language of their own, and from this the dialogue develops between artist and his materials. One often has to discard ideas because they conflict with the materials. Then a kind of struggle begins between the idea which I am trying to express and the material form that I want to give it. If the idea is too insubstantial, too elementary or superficial, the pictures start to protest. If this happens I add something or cross things out and destroy the colour. The changes are dictated by the picture itself. Hence my method of working becomes an inescapable dialogue between an original idea, arising from everyday feelings, and the material of the canvas. 15

Tàpies invokes the idea of struggle with the materials in the realisation of the work. The struggle is not with the materials (for if there is coercion you start “murdering” them) but rather fought out through the materials. If a conflict arises, it is decided from the point of view of the materials. The picture decides on the adequacy of the idea. Should there be any dissonance with the materials in the development, the work is altered to a point where the primacy of the materials is re-established and the process can be recommenced. Both concept and materials, however, are acknowledged as partners. Both partners must ideally realise their full and natural expression through the work if it
is to succeed at all. The struggle involves working with the materials to express adequately the implications of the idea. This notion comes full circle with the involvement with the painter's acquired touch.

What Tapies is describing is the eventual unity and mutual fulfilment of the two forces; the painting only achieving fruition when this balance is satisfied. He implies that both meaning and intention are waiting to be found or, more exactly, realised. This theoretical position seems to be drawn from Eastern metaphysics and seems to negate the possibility of the manipulation of the materials being extended into new areas of meaning.

Materials are frequently assumed to be inherently expressive. When talking of the effect that materials have on the painter/viewer, Francis Bacon spoke in a way that has resonances with the alchemical stance as he ponders on the mysteriousness of the paint's ability to communicate:

That is why real painting is a mysterious and continuous struggle with chance-mysterious because the very substance of the paint, when used in this way, can make such a direct assault on the central nervous system...... 16

Can you analyse the difference in fact, between paint which conveys directly and paint which conveys through illustration? This is a very, very difficult problem to put into words. It is something to do with instinct. It is a very close and difficult thing to know why some paint comes across directly on the nervous system and other paint tells you a story in a long diatribe in the brain. 17

Here Bacon is talking of the paint itself-as far as it is possible to see it independently of
the image it constitutes. It is the paint itself that is "telling a story". He seems to imply that the expressiveness lies with the paint itself. The reaction for the viewer seems to be somatic rather than cerebral, involving the nervous system "directly" rather than the brain.

The substantiality of materials in the world are a metaphor for the painter's connection to the physicality of the tangible world.\textsuperscript{18} Great emphasis on the properties of materials imparts a highly concrete aspect to painting. This "materialism of the material"; this self reflexive character, brings an evocative power to the painting. A large part of the expressive impact falls in the area of texture, as in Schnabel's or Tàpies' paintings. Talking of a Schnabel painting in a catalogue essay Réne Ricard refers to its almost overpowering expressiveness:

> The physicality of the painting seems to outweigh the image value. One doesn't stand in front of these things to see a picture but to feel an impact........I know the antlers in a painting contain information only about antlered animals, only by association and their true significance is aggression towards the viewer.\textsuperscript{19}

Here the expressive nature of the scarred, jagged, heavily encrusted surfaces is seen as more important than the image. So strong and authoritative is the expressiveness in a Schnabel painting that the picture is "felt as an impact" rather than seen. An extreme of surface physicality has been evident in most expressionist painting.

Abstract Expressionists placed another, more narcissistic, weighting on the qualities of nature. Nature, as they interpreted it, also subsumed the true nature or self of the painter. Their explorations were very much centred on materials and the pictorial

Tàpies, Antoni. *Material in the Shape of a Nut*. 1967
Mixed Media on Canvas 195 x 175 Galerie Maeght, Paris.
elements of shape and colour, etc, as well as new materials and the undirected spontaneous experimentation with those materials. The new materials came out of the technology which altered paint manufacture. These technologically advanced paints had a fluidity which encouraged free play, allowing the expression of every possible nuance of handling and making the process visible. According to one contemporary critic, Meyer Schapiro:

The consciousness of the personal and spontaneous in the painting and sculpture stimulates the artist to invent devices of handling, processing, surfacing, which confer to the utmost degree the aspect of the freely made. Hence the great importance of the mark, the stroke, the brush, the drip, the quality of the substance of the paint itself, and the surface of the canvas as texture and field of operation- all signs of the artist's active presence. The work of art is an ordered world of its own kind in which we are aware, at every point, of its becoming.  

In attempting to work from a position of unmitigated spontaneity, Abstract Expressionist painters aimed to integrate with nature and encourage the realisation of their true self in their interaction with the materials and medium. For these painters the whole process of painting took on mythic proportions. The painter emerged as a figure akin to a solar hero who, by epic efforts brought insight, culture and healing despite the indifference of society. When asked by Hans Hoffman whether he was influenced by nature, Jackson Pollock responded “I am nature.” In reference to their motivation, American critic Harold Rosenberg commented;
personality. It is work for the sake of the worker, his means of appropriating nature and the heritage of other men's ideas and skill- thus his means of developing himself. All these qualities of painting may be regarded as a means of affirming the individual in opposition to the contrary qualities in ordinary experience of working and doing.\textsuperscript{21}

The aim was to make the world anew and the Abstract Expressionist painters began with themselves as the primary source materials of art. No longer did painters have an intention or a predetermined cultural context in their mind, nor a tangible subject, to guide them to the completion of the painting. The aim of art was to reveal the self in their interaction with the canvas-and the manipulation of the materials was central to doing so. An obsessive and exhaustive exploration of the self was postulated on its relationship to the universal. Through self knowledge the universal was revealed elevating it, and them, to the level of the absolute. Rosenberg continues;

To the avant-gardist, remaking the maker is the primary art act, the basis of style in the things to be made. Brancusi declared that to make art is easy but the difficulty was to be in a state to make it. The artist himself is the ultimate “work” the object of a continuing creative activity of which the paintings or poems are notes or sketches.\textsuperscript{22}

The handling of materials, as noted by Shapiro above, revealed unformulated domains and patterns of truth in the immediacy of the creative act. Any image so found represented but a partial glimpse of such truth, and Abstract Expressionist painters were notorious for their conviction that the painting was never finished. Here the notion seems to be of a truth that is all encompassing. Hence any representation is a partial or
relative one, which can only point to the all encompassing truth. The sense of becoming that Rosenberg refers to reinforces the idea of the work being a relative truth. Meaning was revealed in the continual becoming of the process and the painting was a tangible vestige of the process. In another context Rosenberg wrote:

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act-rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyse or “express” an object actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event. The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of the encounter. 23

The painter now approached the blank canvas, brush at the ready for an encounter with the self. Through the medium of paint the experience of which would be represented as an image. It would be a reciprocal meeting, for the image would make the artist, as the artist’s understanding would be realised in making the image. The paintings were determinedly abstract, as if any subject matter would have distracted the painters from themselves. Critic Clement Greenberg saw painting’s unique qualities as “the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment”—all purely concrete particularly the materials. Richard Shiff noted:

Significantly, Greenberg described the artist as, to a great degree, led to his discoveries by the demands and integrity of his medium... Within such critical discourse, the medium acquired the modernist values of sincerity and “truth-to-self” which previously had been almost exclusively the domain of the artist. In
the shift from illusionistic representation to “abstraction” and to (especially) “nonobjective” representation— an evolution associated with the “modernist” movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—the origin of the art work in nature was replaced by an origin in “art” or, more precisely, in the medium.24

To Motherwell the medium was a means for getting into the unknown and the limitless internal relations which led to so many possibilities of handling. He also spoke of the “structures which exhibit the various patterns of reality.”25

Colours on the palette or mixed in jars on the floor, assorted papers, or a canvas of a certain concrete space—no matter what, the painting mind is put in motion, probing, finding, completing.26

Donald Kuspit discerned in Julian Schnabel’s use of velvet and broken crockery the expression and immediacy of the surface in modernism that is concomitant with the significant emphasis on materials:

To use such materials, especially in the destructive way Schnabel does.............is one way of raising to a feverish new pitch the rhetoric of rawness which has been an important ideal of art at least since Gauguin and Munch. It was not without effect on Cézanne—modern art’s pursuit of raw surface, which is one of the major strategies of its primitivism, can be derived from Impressionism’s “vibrating” surface—and for many artists and critics it is the gist of modernist painting. That is, raw surface is a major way of making the medium of painting manifest—ideally, self-evident to the point of blasphemous immediacy. Archaic surface on a sophisticated flatness—that is one important version of modernist painting.27
Kuspit sees materials in the service of "rawness" of the surface. The emotional and expressive dimension of materiality was a founding concern of modernism and has grown with it. The "blasphemous immediacy" of the surface not only made the materials manifest but also the medium—*as a painting*. As the content in a narrative, iconographical and allegorical sense receded in importance more and more meaning came to reside in the handling and materiality of the painting. With the communicative emphasis firmly sited in this area, the considered input of culture, together with its history, became a critical epilogue. The intellectual understanding of the work diminished in importance and the viewer, as a subject lost control and submitted to the work, as the cognitive emphasis and distance diminished.

The miracle that Guston wanted again and again resonates with a mystical attitude towards materials that is frequently an undercurrent in Modernism. Primitivism assumed a mystical empathy to exist between primitive people and nature. Primitivism has had a deep influence in modern art practice. It is strongly linked to the expressionist ideal that underpins modernism. Primitivism subsumed Animism which, as Rhodes remarked, functioned by, "allowing them to experience the immediate expressiveness of things—everything is presence and nothing is an it."²⁸ The primitive closeness to nature meant that they were in tune with the primordial stuff of creation and closer to the state before civilisation had brought about the corruption of modern man. A primitive state implied the ability to work and fashion materials to capture the expressiveness of presence, accomplished through a fusion of subject and object, maker and materials. This model of creativity was related to the notion of "primary vision" that envisaged artists working free from theoretical and cultural concerns.
Mysticism proposes an integration with an absolute essence, or the ontological unity which exists behind the dichotomies of the manifest world. The manifest world arises from this essence which is without any of the characteristics of manifestation. The state is realisable through mystical unity, which reifies the primordial unity of subject and object. It is not knowledge in the accepted sense but an inner experience, a concordance between both knower and known on a level that is non-verbal. Explanations are through images, symbolically or in illogical language. As an example, Meister Eckhardt, a thirteenth century German mystic, wrote “The eye by which I see God, is the eye by which God sees me” (the choice of perception reinforces a bias towards intuition).

Noted Orientalist Arthur Waley places skill in making firmly within the realms of a state which flows from an absolute essence. The skill in making is not so much an acquired technique or skill, although these are necessary components, but depends upon a unity with an absolute essence. Both the materials and the maker participate in the same essence. This approach to materials is close to the alchemical position but posits the mystical role of fashioning of materials in terms of an inner knowledge where all distinctions are eliminated. Waley described the unity in the following way:

The wheelwright, the carpenter, the butcher, the bowman, the swimmer achieve their skill not by accumulating facts concerning their art, nor by energetic use of muscles or outward senses, but through utilising the fundamental kinship which, underneath apparent distinctions and diversities unites their own Primal Stuff with the Primal Stuff of the medium in which they work.

Primal Stuff would seem to equate to the concept of the absolute essence of mysticism. Tàpies is an example of this leaning to mysticism seeing art as being “rooted in
mysticism.” His interviews and writing reflect his interests in Oriental metaphysics and mystical thought, especially that of the thirteenth century Catalan mystic, Ramon Lull. Responding to a question about mysticism, he affirmed his faith in its centrality to his practice:

Yes, and the stronger any sense of affinity with a more or less orthodox tradition of mysticism becomes, the more I believe that the attitude of the great mystics, the whole phenomenon of mysticism, serves as a stimulus to the creative process. The artist himself is a mystical phenomenon. I regard mysticism as a state of mind which is necessary to scientific thinking as well as to art: it enables one to discover things which cannot be found by any other means.

Tàpies' interest in mysticism is by no means an exception within the art world. Although the notions are generally expressed in an entirely different manner, the mystical undercurrent continues to the present time. Josef Beuys, who also spoke of mysticism, came to his materials through his life experiences. His wartime experiences are a metaphor for the fascination and emphasis on nature in Modernism. As the representative of an advanced predatory culture, he crashed his aeroplane in a less technologically advanced country. He would have died but for the help of the local people who treated his burns with fat and wrapped him in felt. Without the assistance of the pre-industrial populace and their very unsophisticated healing remedies he would have died. Despite his advanced knowledge and cultural superiority, he needed new means, which were really old or primitive means and materials, to survive. These materials were ordinary, everyday ones close to their natural state.

Another facet of the painter/materials nexus has also been explored by the philosopher
Merleau-Ponty. He argues that it is the relationship with the medium that allows the painter to make meaning of the world. The painter gives material substance to his perceptions of the world. Paul Crowther summarises Merleau-Ponty’s ideas on art and materials thus:

The artist is a person whose approach to life has been significantly defined by a relationship to a medium such as painting or writing. He has learnt an affinity between the body and the handling of a specific medium that enables his body to take fuller grasp of the meanings he encounters in perception. This discovery may have been a natural outcome of early ability in relation to the medium, or it may come about through a crisis in life or a series of extraordinary situations that awaken him to a lack of fullness in his existence. Whatever the origin, once an artist has lent himself to a medium, his perception will be influenced by its demands. As Gombrich says in relation to one branch of the arts: ...... “painting is an activity, and the artist will therefore tend to see what he paints rather than to paint what he sees.”

The notion of a mystical unity also involves the painter carnally-to adopt Merleau-Ponty’s terminology-as the relationship with the materials is effected on the somatic level. The painter’s manner of application assumes particular importance, as touch resonates with the body's experiences and memory. Touch is also associated with opacity and closeness. Both these notions are linked to surface materiality and the positing of meaning in the surface.

On the other hand, Donald Kuspit, in developing his argument for the therapeutic intention of modern art, takes an opposing viewpoint. He sees the mystical or alchemical
relationship as "mystification and mythification." Kuspit expounds this approach in a psychological light as incorporating beliefs about the self and experience, seeing them as a mystification of attitudes which have a psychological foundation. Kuspit writes:

The avant-garde artist's sense of the primordial embodies itself in what Herman Brosh calls "mysticism of the medium". In objectifying his expression in the medium, the artist invests it with his primordial sense experience and sense of self, transforming it into a primordial substance, as it were, which seems the mythical whole of experience. The medium seems to have the same immediacy as the pure sense presentation, and the same integrity as the True Self. Such mysticism-mystification and mythification?-of the medium intensifies the avant-garde artist's sense of the world's objective reality and his own subjective reality. The medium, now the primary object of sense experience, the field on which it is played out, become the surrogate for-indeed, the advocate of-the self. It becomes external and internal object in one, a mode of relation in itself. Indeed, mysticism of the medium means fusing symbiotically with it, establishing a unity of internal and external values. The medium nurtures and supports-indeed, mothers-the artist, embodying his sense of purpose. Insight into the medium gives him his intention as an artist. At the same time, mysticism of the medium is not blind narcissistic investment in it, for the self responds to it instinctively and restlessly, and it is sensuously appealing only when it is sensuously unsettling, that is, when it suggests new possibilities of sensing.

He continues his line of thought in a footnote to this paragraph:

The medium, with its particular subjective qualities, is the inexpressible artistic
content of the work—its mystical core—while the attitude implicit in it becomes explicit in the perceiver’s psyche. It spontaneously positions him in his secret world, making him feel more real than he does in the everyday world with which he must comply. His introjects are evoked by those of the artist, giving him a sense of inward communion—mystical intimacy—with the work of art, which makes it seem extraordinarily real.  

Kuspit presents these assumptions about the medium as psychological self-absorption. He focuses on a narcissistic aspect of modernism that has been maximised by its material emphasis. Modernism’s oppositional stance to the prevailing culture necessitated that it absorb and explore all possible and disparate aspects of ideas and materials. This engendered great vitality but diminished the element of common experience. As artistic concerns became more idiosyncratic a kind of protective sensitivity, which was narcissistic and inward looking developed as compensation for social isolation. Post war Europeans painters, revolted by the culture which spawned the war time horrors, retreated into exploration of materials as the basic stuff of renewal. Any material embodied a reality and truth that was at the opposite pole to the idea of culture.

Any reduction of painting’s meaning to an intention, a set of psychological factors or memory aid, despite their obvious influence and importance, is only a partial exegesis of the work. In the tele-documentaries on Tàpies, a closing off of the possibilities of meaning and interpretation is coupled with control over the viewer’s understanding. Understanding thus comes to accord with the inherent limitations of the television medium and falls within the realm of information. Crowther reinforces these sentiments in his summary of Merleau-Ponty’s thought:
Simply to reduce art works to the artist's mental states, or intentions etc., is to reduce them to insignificance. It is the process of physical re-creation that takes the creativity of perception to completion. We could not, in fact, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, understand how a 'mind' could paint. Hence, the conclusion that: "A novel, a poem, a picture or musical work are individuals, that is, beings in which expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed."  

Physical recreation involves the whole person—the body, the senses and all the states of the mind, and all modes of understanding, come into play in the process of working with the materials. Kuspit's interpretation of the painter's relationship with materials as psychological self absorption places undue emphasis on but one of many mental states. To site all meaning in the realm of "mental states" is to focus interpretation and meaning on the constructed language and culture. To do this would be to repudiate the fundamental influence of many factors which co-exist within the layers of cultural and educational conditioning. What is interesting about Tàpies' disdain for academic painting, is that he should need to make such a statement in the 1950s, when many of the axioms of Modernism were already dominant. 

Whilst it would be erroneous to deny that paintings exist within social and cultural structures, it would be equally erroneous to assume that they are in total accordance with them. To see painting only as an outcome of specific social conditions, as the BBC tv program on Tàpies tended to do, is to deny any real status to painting. It also marginalises areas in which painting operates like the sensuous which embodies the possibility of intuition and similar modes of understanding.

Whatever approach the painter has to materials, it must be remembered that there is an
approach. They are never unconsidered. Even for those painters who seem least interested in materials and their use, materials are integral to their practice. The approaches detailed here all touch on areas that are encompassing of something more than just mental states. Whether it be alchemical, mystical or expressive they are all distinct from purely intellectual understanding and hence incorporate alternative modes of understanding.

In the following chapter the outcomes of surface materiality and the meanings created will be explored through an examination of the different ways of actually working the surface.

1. Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art 1991 *Unfamiliar Territory* p4
2. Tàpies Andreas Francke p16
4. Ibid p69
5. *Conversations with Antoni Tàpies* p80
6. *An Animal* 183x 153 oil and pelt on canvas. 1961
7. *Theories of Contemporary Art*. a profusion of substance. p237
8. *The Forge and the Crucible* p157
10. Ibid p348.
11. *Discovering the Present*. p75
13. This quote is at the chapter heading.
14. *Abstract Expressionism : Creators and Critics*. p95
15. *Conversations with Antoni Tàpies* p89;
16. *Theories of Modern Art* p620
17. *The Brutality of Fact* p18
18. A blatant example of this would be the paintings of Fautrier, Dubuffet and Tàpies. All have, at times, resonances of walls.
19. *Julian Schnabel*. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam 1982. Although this article is several pages long, the pages
are not numbered in the catalogue.

20. *ART News* vol. 56 no.4 summer 1957 pp 36-42. The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde

21. *Art & Work* p 67

22. *Ibid* p75

23. *ART news* vol.51 no. 8 December 1952. The American Action Painters

24. *Cezanne and the End of Impressionism* p66

25. Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics. p105

26. *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America* p10

27. *Rhetoric of Rawness* p28

28. *Primitivism and Modern Art* p 67

29. The description by saints and others of their religiously inspired visions are characterised by complex and vivid images plus the extreme quality of visuality.

30. Merleau-Ponty refers to looking at things which also look at the looker.

31. *Book of Tao Te King*. (Similarly St. Thomas Aquinas wrote “knowledge comes about in so far as the object known is within the knower.” Sum Theol. I,Q. 59. a 2)

32. *Conversations with Antoni Tàpies* (p14-20) The author writes that Tàpies work shows “obvious references to the various combination tables in either *Ars Maior* or the *Ars inventia.*” (Lull’s works). Lull’s name appears in Tàpies prints ‘ For example the 1975 aquatint “Three R's” .

33. *Conversations with Antoni Tàpies* p73

34. *British Journal of Aesthetics* Vol. 22 No 2 Summer 82

35. *The Cult of the Avant-Garde* p8

Working the Surface

"certain critics can talk about modernism's obsession with visuality and opticality in the face of the pictures themselves, which just doesn't impress me as materiality flat or disembodied."

Richard Shiff

This chapter will examine the implications of materiality and surface from the point of view of making and reception (the receiving of ideas and impressions into the mind" OED). The way a painter paints is often represented in books and films—the BBC Tàpies documentary is a good example—as somehow genuine, unaffected and natural that they would find it difficult to imagine doing it in any other way. However, the manner of working is changeable, being continually modified by experiences garnered in the making process. A substantial part of working the surface involves manipulating inanimate materials to convey and carry meaning. The meanings manifested with the materiality of the worked surface, are not directly connected with visuality. As we shall see materiality encourages the painting to be seen as an object instead of an image or pictorial representation. The surface facture positions the spectator both physically and
philosophically so as to highlight the self reflexivity of the materials.

Bodily movements that generate mark making are ingrained, spontaneous and natural. The application of materials leads to an expression of meanings the artist has understood physically as well as intellectually. The nature of the material surface favours a metaphorical bridge between painter and viewer: the painter goes through the process of making which is seen as a trace by the viewer. Despite the erasive nature of painting, the physical process revealed in the surface’s materiality is to a greater or lesser extent embodied in the viewer's perception of the painting. The question of what it means to work the surface will be examined from the perspective of the body and the senses of sight and touch.

Materiality draws attention to itself through its vitality, texture and paint manipulation. It is convenient to talk of the opacity of a material surface in opposition to its transparency. Surface materiality demands an almost visceral response from the viewer as the meaning of the sensuous surface is only fully understood through its physical impact on the viewer. Surface opacity establishes a closeness for the viewer in distinction to the distance engendered with surface transparency. One technique for engaging the spectator on this level is realised in the physical immediacy of the surface. The surface is worked through manipulating the paint, applying it thickly, and emphasising surface texture and the incorporation of materials into oil paints. The propensity towards a physicality of surface has led to materials, including household objects, being used instead of paint. According to Donald Kuspit, the paintings of Julian Schnabel provide examples of this approach to the surface:
The transformation of vibrating surface into agitated (anxious) surface—that is the formula of primitivism "civilised" or used for modern purposes, namely, to register and reveal through an estranging visual label the disturbed self underneath and disruptive of the social surface, the horrendous feelings of disintegration corroding the integrating, "socialising" shapes. In other words, primitivism in its modern use is a mode of liberation from repression. It claims to offer concentrated expression—which makes it seem to speak an unknown language—to repressed feelings.  

Here the painter's aim, interpreted in psychological terms, is seen as an escape from the inhibition and repression of social and cultural conditioning. It is characterised as being primitive, as this reflects the belief that artistic freedom is to be achieved through regression to a state of pre-industrial culture. Part of the reason is due to the fact that to a large degree the primitive has been structured in terms of its opposition to culture. A demolition of the prevailing cultural mores characterises much contemporary art and the primitive state is one avenue to effect this. The primitive in painting has evolved under changing circumstances, but one fairly constant quality has been related to power or presence associated with the work. To quote Donald Kuspit again:

One of the lessons of modernism is that only the most immediate surfaces communicate intentionality in the modern world, in whatever way the effect of immediacy is generated. Only the fiction of immediacy, carried out on literal surfaces, catalyses meaning and feeling. It is the surface alone that we cathect with today, surface seductive in itself, but with the
promise of profundity—but the moment we fall for the bait of surface, become hooked on it, we experience unexpected depth of meaning and feeling. That is, through the intense sensation of a particular surface we experience a general rush of elemental power.²

Kuspit here succinctly summarises some of the often unspoken or barely hinted at beliefs of many artists in relation to the surface. Kuspit speaks of the surface in terms that place it outside of an intellectual reading and also outside the control of an autonomous individual. It is a trap that we unwittingly fall into or an addiction we become hooked on. Paradoxically when this loss of autonomy or submission occurs we then experience an "unexpected depth of meaning and feeling." This profundity is described in terms that resonates with the words of many artists—as being an elemental power. The Parisian artists who had contact with African sculptures by prior to World War I continually spoke of both power and presence in relation to them. As a power it operates in an arena that is not necessarily understood intellectually, but felt carnally. Kuspit, in the above quote, also does not talk of it as being understood or discriminated but of it being experienced.

One critic who has devoted much attention to the process as an aspect of performance is Richard Shiff. He talks, in relation to Modernism, of "reintroducing an element that has been neglected"³ and queries criticism which continually refers to modernism's concern with visuality when the pictures themselves are not flat. The avowed visuality of many Modernist paintings is denied by heavily textured surface and their considerable thickness and weight.

Tàpies, Antoni. *Form of a Crucified Figure*. 1959. Mixed Media on Canvas. 200 x 175.5 Private Collection Barcelona.
Shiff characterises his approach as having “a tendency to describe works from the position of the maker not the viewer.” Although “most art historians and critics see works as things for their own observation, objectified”, Shiff argues that:

They are not only seeing the image, but also something of the process and the materiality of the work. It’s through the materiality that the work so often conveys a sense of the physicality to its viewer. So I get very interested in studio processes, the actual use of materials—because I think that, in modernist work in particular, much of the meaning is conveyed through a sense of the physical circumstances that surround the work. That of course leads me to think about touch because if you, as a viewer, are concerned only with what you see, you may feel that’s adequately covered by trying to describe what your eyes sense. But if we are concerned with seeing how something was made, then we are focussing to a greater extent on how the artist coordinated eyes with hands.4

Since the early part of the nineteenth century there has been a shift in emphasis away from the transparent surface and the picture plane considered as a window to the world. This mode of illusionistic representation distances viewers, positioning them on the outside—although it is possible for them to look in. Being outside, the viewer is at a distance. The distance posits an overview of the work which tends towards the abstract rather than immediacy. Separation from the object places the viewer in a position of control and appreciation becomes centred in the conscious mind. The minutiae of tangible experience is lost in the comprehensive sweep of the eye, which has little to check the movement of the gaze.
Even in an era when interest in surface was not as pronounced as it is now, painters went
to great pains to extract every possible type of mark from their materials. An excellent
example that illustrates the dexterity and inventiveness of handling, characteristic of a
painter's working of materials and a fascination with them, is given by Bryson, quoting
from the Goncourts description of a Fragonard pastel:

His effects suggest that he used chalk without a holder, that he rubbed it flat for
the masses, that he was continually turning it between his thumb and forefinger in
risky, but inspired, wheelings and twistings; that he rolled and contorted it over
the branches of his trees, that he broke it on the zigzags of his foliage. Every
irregularity of the chalk's point, which he left unsharpened, was pressed into
service: when it blunted, he drew fully and broadly; when it sharpened, he turned
to the subtleties and the lights.  

Many contemporary paintings show a tendency to allow the physicality of the surface to
dominate through the use of thick paint, extraneous materials and even everyday objects
incorporated into the surface. If the viewer's attention is shifted from the "objectified
object" to the studio processes, materiality and touch, then attention is also shifted to the
process the painter undertakes in making. As a consequence, qualities associated with
materiality and process also become highlighted. The viewer's experience inclines
towards a tangible, multifaceted immediacy at the expense of a concern for the
illusionistic-and distant-image. If vision and touch can be seen as discrete phenomena
then physicality of a work can be said to encourage intimations of touch. Touch is never
a grand sweep from a distance but is fragmented and incremental, executed close to the
work. Touch is not only the movement that marks the surface, but also the experience the painter has in making the mark. Both are part of the viewer’s experience of the work.

The expansion of the somatic role in the work is at the expense of the rational mind which traditionally worked within the structured order of perspective. Touch, which to some degree has always verified authenticity, became the signifier for the immediate presence of the maker.\(^6\) By orienting the surface towards physicality and touch, painters are registering the way a body relates to and makes sense of the world. The reciprocity of touch is often forgotten in the immediacy of touching. The object, also touches the body. This touch is fragmentary, on-going and close, more akin to a glance which flicks from spot to spot than the distant overview of a gaze. The effect of the glance is achieved through a reflexive structure carried out by the senses rather than through the social organisation of science and order. These two aspects or viewpoints indicate the manner in which the painter organises perceived objects.

Opposing the ordered vision of perspectival space we have the immediacy of ever changing interaction of relationships. Surface physicality is not achieved for its own sake. It cannot exist alone. John Loughery sums up the complexity well when he writes, in relation to Anselm Keifer:

And in some ways the most distinctive thing about this body of work is that, unfailingly, the meaning is intimated through the object in all its concrete, complex materiality. The labored constructing that Keifer clearly puts into each work perfectly corresponds to our sense of what the work is about: an excavation
of anguished memories, the forging of a new sense of self and nation, an unembarrassed anxiety about our spiritual lives. His truths are visual, tactile and emotional as much as they are intellectual. The ‘idea’ of a Keifer painting, any summary or exegesis, the best reproduction or description, means nothing before the experience one has of the vast scale and intricate presence of the painting itself.

Despite this there is limited public discourse on the methods of working, centring, as it does, on the end product rather than the process. The end product takes account of what is there, without much emphasis on the series of events which led to it. The contingency of the process is in most cases part and parcel of the painter’s thought process. Anything that happens in the process cannot be shut out of perception, it must, in some way, be dealt with. For example, Francis Bacon in a long interview with David Sylvester, said:

With oil paint being so fluid the image is changing all the time while you’re working. One thing either builds on another or destroys the other. You see I don’t think that generally people really understand how mysterious, in a way, the actual manipulation of oil paint is. Because moving—even unconsciously moving—the brush one way rather than the other will completely alter the implications of the image. But you could only see it if it happened before you. I mean it’s in the way that one end of the brush may be filled with another colour and the pressing of the brush, by accident, makes a mark which gives resonance to other marks and this leads to further a development of the image. It’s really a continuous question of the fight between accident and criticism. Because of what I call accident may
give you some marks that seem to be more real, truer to the image than another one, but its only your critical sense that can select it. So that your critical faculty is going on at the same time as the sort of half-unconscious manipulation-or very unconscious, generally, if it works at all.  

Richard Shiff reinforces Bacon’s position when he said: “I stress that an artist’s active experience with materials keeps altering his or her own sense of purpose or motivation.” Shiff’s position highlights the subtle interaction and influence of the materials on the painter’s thought processes during the making. As the maker and viewer the painter alternates between two positions in relation to the work. These positions are reminiscent of Bacon’s “question of a fight between accident and criticism.” The evolving events of the process are evaluated in relation to the good of the work. The interaction of the two positions mirrors the two types of awareness that will be discussed later in this chapter.

Physicality does not negate the tension between the illusion of a depicted reality and the two dimensionality of the surface, which has always existed in painting, but it does tilt the scales. John Hyman has explored this tendency:

When an artist employs geometrical perspective he does not draw what he sees—he represents his retinal image. As we know, these are very different, for what is seen is affected by constancy scaling.....We begin to see why it took so long for perspective to be adopted by painters. In an important sense perspective representations of three dimensions are wrong, for they do not depict the world as it is seen but rather the (idealised) images on the retina.
The retinal image is one that is never seen. Representation of the retinal image encourages the avoidance of many of the qualities inherent in any visual experience. They are qualities which might detract from the idealisation that perspective brings. As Pirenne notes:

The eye is the only optical instrument which forms an image which was never intended to be seen. This is the great difference between the eye and the camera... What the artist sees and paints on his canvas is not his retinal image, nor the stimulation pattern formed in his brain.¹¹

With rough paint, however, the possibility of illusion is diminished and we are compelled to look at the painting differently. Pirenne, writing of the fresco by Fra Andrea Pozzo in the church of the St. Ignazio, Rome, which was painted on a vaulted hemispherical ceiling, notes the dominance of the perspectival element of the mural. He writes;

Our awareness of the characteristics of the surface of a picture may be called a ‘subsidiary’ awareness in the sense in which Polanyi (1958, 1962) uses this term, in contradistinction with our ‘focal’ awareness of the subject represented. At the same time as we are attending to the scene in depth, we are also aware, in a much less positive way, of many clues relating to the surface and the frame of the picture.¹²

In a footnote to this passage, he adds:

The connoisseur and the expert can transfer his focal awareness from the scene to
the painted surface, as a surface. As to the artist executing a painting, he must
perforce become focally aware of the manner he disposes his pigments on his
canvas, and thus of the surface pattern of his picture. 13

Polanyi argues that a painting is essentially blobs of colour on a support,14 which is so if
you refer to the subsidiary awareness, but not so if you refer to the focal awareness. He
concludes we can see painting as an illusion or as a brush stroke, as we come closer to
the work, but we can only see one or the other. Here we have another explanation of the
division that came to the fore in painting about the time of Ingres and Delacroix. For a
painter who is fascinated by the surface, focal awareness becomes very much a
subordinate aspect of the work. The grand sweep of the image tends to lost in the
minutiae of the surface incident, with its concomitant contingencies and tangible
emphasies.

Such a distinction helps us begin to understand the ferocity of Ingres’ opposition to
Delacroix's manner of painting. It was not a question of style but that Delacroix’s
practices undermined the foundations of his hierarchical and ordered view of the world.
The prominence of the brushstroke actually subverted the social hierarchy that Ingres
supported. The emphasis on subsidiary awareness encouraged an alternative way of
understanding the world outside the established social framework. Delacroix’s painting
had the effect of confronting Ingres and the establishment he represented with a very real
and menacing alternative.

Sixty five years after the Academy of 1855 the expressive brushstroke had developed
into Automatism. This approach that evolved along with Surrealism, can be considered the extreme manifestation of the physical aspect of mark making. The painter's body played a major role in attempting to avoid technical dexterity and harness the creative vitality of the unconscious through speed of execution. Jackson Pollock’s work is an exemplar of this. Surrealist technique turned into an expressionist method. The photographic images of Pollock, with unstretched canvas on the floor, dancing around and on it, dripping and splashing paint in bodily animated circles, is one of the best known images of late Modernism. It can be seen as the end point in the direction opened by Delacroix. Nothing could be less ordered and measured or further from the fixed single viewpoint of perspective. It would be difficult to imagine a manner of painting that placed greater emphasis on the body and performance.

Most painters mark the canvas in a more intimate and restrained manner, more confined by their materials and implements. Automatism was utilised by those painters motivated by a desire to harness the natural movements of the body as it moved untrammelled by the inhibiting prejudice of thought. The sense of free movement was enhanced by Pollock’s dripping/pouring of the paint. Pollock’s technique moved another degree towards the elimination of the culturally conditioned mark. By working in this manner he utilised the natural effects of gravity, avoiding all contact with the support. Even the bodily intervention of the individual painter in the process had been dramatically reduced. The process incorporated to an extreme degree a fluidity of bodily movements that were previously unexplored pictorially and in so doing achieved a kinship with performance. In the words of Richard Shiff:
To be as natural as nature is to abandon and defeat artifice, to impose immediate expression over acquired technical skill, and perhaps to transfer one’s art to the realm of one’s most habitual and instinctive motor responses. The two generations of painters simply apply different strategies: Manet aims to “copy” nature with mechanistic fidelity, as if he were producing the equivalent of a photograph: Pollock, however, releases the found images of his “unconscious,” seemingly letting them paint their own picture.  

Here Shiff catalogues aims that have been, in some form or other, put forward by many painters, especially those with an expressionistic bent. The natural, the instinctive and the expressive are espoused to emphasise their implicit rejection of cultural values. With “habitual motor responses”, input from the rational mind is at its lowest possible point. Hand and body responses must be interactive and responsive to the work, to avoid the trap of facility and meaningless gesture. For American critic Arthur Rosenberg, who was concerned with the imperfections of this tendency, there were drawbacks:

The dissolution of the human essence based on man’s handling of materials now reaches its climax in automation, by which even the most rudimentary operative skills are eliminated. In regard to man as a tool using fabricator, the outlook is thus one of absolute blackness. He may preserve his skills out of sentimentality, and even revive abandoned ones, but these exercises no longer have a role in the serious realm of necessity and can no longer hold the human being to an ultimate definition.
Impressionist paint application techniques came to rival the use of colour, tone and composition in importance. The scandalous impact of Monet's 'Impression-Sunrise' was in no small part due to the manner in which it was painted. Its unblended brushstrokes and surface emphasis led much contemporary critical comment to focus on his alleged dishonesty, demonstrated by the lack of finish and hence skills displayed in the work. Similar derogatory comparisons in more recent times have been drawn between the techniques of abstraction and a child's ability to paint. Any perceived ambiguity, imprecision or roughness is often enough to cause the work to be categorised as amateurish or unskilful.

Michael Parsons has shown that for children and lay people, skill of execution (representation) rates very highly and is perceived simultaneously with their first impressions of the work. Any appreciation of the medium comes at a more mature stage with more exposure to and greater understanding of art. An appreciation of the materials comes with an understanding of technique, for an appreciation of a single painting refers to painting as a whole. For, as Parsons notes, the ability to consider the role of the materials is not only involved in appreciating the painting as an object, but also in considering it in a cultural context. The importance of this area is indicated by the profusion of technically descriptive words applied to paint manipulation. Paint can be washed on, scumbled, worked impasto, wet in wet, dry brush, glazed, as well as being dribbled, splashed and scraped.

Many contemporary artists have made great use of awkwardly applied thick paint. However neither touch nor rough should be understood in terms of the thickness of the
applied paint. Even at the time of Rembrandt the smooth or rough handling of the paint was a broad definition of a category of painting. Svetlana Alpers\textsuperscript{19} reinforces Michael Parsons' research, noting that, the rough mode of application was seen to be appreciated by the courtiers and people of refined sensibilities. There is, however, a contrary opinion that by Rembrandt's time this interpretation of the distinction in modes of handling was seen as passé.

Contrary to accepted practice, Rembrandt built up his highlights to the extent that they became the areas of greatest solidity. Contemporary sources note that he suggested to a client that one of his paintings be hung in strong light and viewed from a distance.\textsuperscript{20} Unlike the flower painters of the time, whose works were examined from a close proximity, Rembrandt meant his to be seen from a distance. Viewed close up the image would not be visible. This is frequently not a prerequisite for contemporary painting where large size and facture allows for the intimacy of close contact. For Rembrandt, however, the process of working demanded a particular position from the spectator and this also implied a statement on the art of painting. Furthermore the solidity of Rembrandt's impasto-it was thick enough to cast a shadow-inclines the painting towards the sculptural with all its connotations of touch.

Alpers relates Rembrandt's rough style to self-reflexivity. Writing of Rembrandt's \textit{The Oath of Claudius Civilis}, she compares Rembrandt's treatment with that of other painters of the time and notes:

His painting is hard to make out at first-the figures and objects, which appear to
emerge into light from the obscured, darker surroundings are bound in an extraordinary way to the paint surface. The visual presence of the paint interferes with, or replaces, the implicit access to the surface of the world. Everything, from the firmness of hand grasps to the diverse richness of the garment, is urged upon us as the display of different qualities of the pigment that is not only colored, but worked and shaped. The oath taken by the Batavian revolutionaries is celebrated in the very material of the paint. 21

Self-reflexive use of paint was to become of greater concern in New York in the late fifties and sixties. Although the quality of the paint was very different in both cases, both were characterised by an extended working and reworking of the paint. The viscosity of the paint was different in each case which had an strong impact on the look of the surface. Subsidiary awareness of the surface in the American works was enhanced by the absence of a recognisable image. Alpers further categorises the aspects of materiality and touch in Rembrandt:

We might do well to distinguish between three forms in which this availability to touch is manifest in Rembrandt's paintings: the facture or thickness of the paint, the implied solidity of objects represented within the paintings and the painting itself as an object. 22

Alpers23 makes much of the foregrounding of touch in Rembrandt's painting. Phenomenologist and philosopher, Mikel Dufrenne, explores sensuality and states the belief that insights are more readily available through vision:
Seeing is a kind of touching without it being reduced to touching, as Descartes did, and above all without reducing touching to a mechanism, stressing on the contrary the fact that touching is itself a type of seeing. All the sensuous brings itself together in such a way that appearing makes sense, and that means that a Logos inhabits the sensuous and is known to our body prior to any cognitive operation. Painting shows how. 24

It is not only technical effects and manipulative skills that are reflected in paint handling. The process of making the marks also emphasises the body and bodily meanings. Norman Bryson discusses an aspect of Asian painting in terms similar to those of Richard Shiff:

...landscape is certainly the subject, but equally the subject is the work of the brush in 'real time' and as an extension of the painter's own body; and if that is true for this early Northern Sung painting, it will be true to an even greater extent with Chinese painting after Tung, Ch'i-ch'ang and with Japanese painting after Sesshu. The work of production is constantly displayed in the wake of its traces; in this tradition the body of labour is on constant display, just as it is judged in terms which in the West, would only apply to performing art.25

The marks made by the brush are visible records of its trajectory through space and time and engage the viewer in much the same way as they did the maker. The viewer is able to re-enact the movement of the brush and feel the bodily movements, empathising with the painter's movements and reading the painting physically, in a mode comparable to that of
the painter who painted it. Much of painting's immediate impact is directed towards the body, which results from the painter's deliberate attempts to avoid the strictures of cultural conditioning. The aim is to communicate body to body, as it were. As Andreas Francke says of a Tapies painting:

It's highly symbolic, yet entirely non-representational character itself conveys an impression of enigma. This impression is increased by the key part played by material in the pictures or, even more directly, by real elements integrated in them. Both possess a mysterious attraction, and they trigger a physical reaction on the part of the viewer. One finds oneself physically identifying as it were with the physical body of the work, which is there to be touched, grasped.  

Julian Schnabel was even more explicit about the emphasis on the body mirroring the raw physicality of his paintings:

In a sense, yes. I want a body viewing a body. The entire picture is like a body or figure. I want it to be on a par with the spectator's figure, to engage his or her person on the most intimate bodily level. The picture is also like a body because of the weight of its material, and I want to make the spectator feel the weight of his or her body. The sense of heaviness has been important to me from Jack and the Bellboy on. I really don't want to make just another picture on a plane. I want to make something that denies the picture plane-denies pictorially itself and at the same time contains pictoriality. I want to make a work that is reality itself, not just an illusion of it.
Following Schnabel's logic all tension between reality and the representation would be lost and the body would react to and make sense of the picture as it would the world. Artifice would have been banished and with it all the input and conditioning of Western culture and the painting tradition. All that would be left would be reality.

Richard Wollheim\(^29\) makes the point that the one constant in painting is that the painter's bodily posture has not changed at all. Whether the canvas is on the floor or on an easel, the painter is always positioned in front of the canvas. Wollheim considers that this is because the painter paints not only with his eyes but for his eyes. Mikel Dufrenne, however, postulates a very different interaction between painter and work: “The painter sees the work revealing itself as he works upon it. Such is the secret of his making: the painting is not before his eyes, but in his hands.”\(^29\)

Physicality encouraged the concept of “seeing in”. Surface, as nature, was there to be made sense of. Images were there to be discovered and discerned, rather than to be presented or represented. The viewer was to be actively engaged rather than passively present. All sense of voyeuristic viewing was then eliminated. All these qualities were enhanced by the physicality of the surface and only possible because of it. Examining the capability that he labels “seeing-in” Richard Wollheim says:

Seeing-in is a distinct kind of perception, and is triggered off by the presence within the field of vision of a differentiated surface. Not all differentiated surfaces will have this effect, but I doubt that anything significant can be said about exactly what a surface must be like for it to have this effect. ......... The distinctive
phenomenological feature I call ‘twofoldness’, because, when seeing-in occurs, two things happen: I am visually aware of the surface I look at, and I discern something standing out in front of, or (in certain cases) receding behind, something else.30

The materiality of the surface strives to stop us passing by and aims to make us see the two aspects. With strong surfaces Polyani suggests that subsidiary awareness dominate—or at least we can see one then the other—and so encourage characteristics associated with the surface, the glance, seeing as touching and interaction. However, there can be occasions when the spectator does not see the painting as a painting, as Pirenne explains:

When ordinary pictures are viewed in the usual manner, with both eyes, the spectator is aware of the characteristics of the picture surface, including its shape and position. This is very important for his perception of the picture. It is only in exceptional cases or when special arrangements are being used that this ‘subsidiary awareness’ of the picture surface, qua surface, fails to arise: then the picture is a trompe-l’oeil, perceived as a scene in three dimensions. In most cases this special awareness of the picture surface is present, a fact which has important consequences with regard both to the practical usefulness of pictures as representations and to their artistic effect.

The conditions in which subsidiary awareness were minimised under the influence of the French Academy will be considered in the next chapter. When the surface is treated as a transparent element that is looked through to see the picture’s content, it provides the
opportunity for specific characteristics to come into play, characteristics which were
exhaustively rejected by twentieth century painters.

1. Rhetoric of Rawness p128
2. Ibid p129
4. Ibid p8
5. Vision and Painting p130
6. Even with the present days wonders of DNA evidence, forensic evidence still considers fingerprints as the
most certain and reliable evidence of presence at a certain site.
7. Back to Matter Back to Matter: Recent Constructed Paintings by David Geiser and Tomas Nunn art journal
vol 50 spring 1991 p72
8. The Brutality of Fact p121.
10. The Imitation of Nature p174-6
11. Optics Painting & Photography p10
12. Ibid p 114
13. Ibid p 114
14. This assertion is made in What is Painting
15. Performing an Appearance: On the Surface of Abstract Expressionism. p96
16. Art & Work p62
17. How we Understand Art The discussion of the medium of painting centres on Chapter 4
19. Rembrandt's Enterprise. Most of what is written here has been drawn from the first chapter of this book.
20. Rembrandt's Enterprise. p14
21. Ibid p23
22. Ibid p23
23. Svetlana Alpers makes much of hands/touch as in the ‘laying on of hands’ as in Aristotle Contemplating the
Bust of Homer and the largeness of the hands in Rembrandt’s work.
24. In the Presence of the Sensuous. Painting, Forever. p139
25. Vision and Painting p 92
26. Tàpies Andreas Francke p16
27. Art Talk p154
28. Painting as an Art p39
29. In the Presence of the Sensuous Painting, Forever p148
30. Painting as an Art p46
The Transparent Surface

"In visual experience, which pushes objectification further than
does tactile experience, we can, at least at first sight, flatter
ourselves that we constitute the world, because it presents us
with a spectacle spread out before us at a distance, and gives us
the illusion of being immediately present everywhere."
Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Surface has always been a concern for painters. The painters of the French Academy put,
as Greenberg says, a "less obvious yet less ambiguous emphasis on it." Their concern
was for the "spectacle spread out before us at a distance" The early Nineteenth century
painters, who did not belong to the Academy, gave it a different emphasis which broke
with the previous traditions. The consequences of this break with tradition, will be
looked at in the context of what a painting means, the way of making it and of its
reception. In rejecting the transparency of the surface, the modernist works of Delacroix
proposed a manner of viewing that subverted the cultural values in the works of the
Academy. The Modernist temperament had a decided opposition to the prevailing
culture epitomised by the Academy and its values. This was true at the time of Delacroix.
A large part of the emphasis on materiality and surface was linked to the aim of differentiating painters from the contemporary industrial culture.

Over the next one hundred years an aspect of culture that was not seen as being in the mainstream of industrial Europe was accorded a real significance. The roughness of the material surface was a metaphor for all that was different from the smooth perfection of industrial products.

At the time of the Paris World Fair in 1855, public opinion about the arts was polarised over the forty works exhibited by Ingres and the thirty five by Delacroix. Ingres, for thirty years a member of the Academy, was a bitter antagonist to the ideas and developments in painting propounded by Delacroix. Ingres and his followers used all their considerable power and prestige to ensure that Delacroix was excluded from any official position of influence. Although Ingres was personally very critical of the Academy as a stifling body—"a picture shop" as he called it—he abhorred the vitality, freshness and new ideas that Delacroix epitomised. Delacroix had put forward his candidacy to the Academy six times, but was rejected on every occasion. A contemporary cartoon illustrated the different ideological positions when it depicted Delacroix and Ingres, with a paint brush and pen in their respective hands jousting in front of the Institut de France. Ingres is saying "Colour is Utopia. Long live Line." Delacroix is responding with "Line is Colour."

The cartoon encapsulates the ideological changes that were taking place in the art world of the time. The struggle against the Academic tradition and the values inherent in its system of patronage was centred on the work of Delacroix and the new directions he
espoused. The struggle was largely undertaken by artists born in the first half of the
Nineteenth century like Courbet and Gericault. For the Impressionist and Post
Impressionist painters from Manet to Cezanne, this struggle against the Academy-and its
control of official patronage-was a formative influence on their lives and approaches to
painting. By the early part of this century the struggle for critical acceptance had largely
been won and new paths, directions and tendencies had been revealed for the next
generation to explore and develop. The oppositional concepts associated with
representing nature that had imbued the lives of the Impressionists has continued to be an
underlying influence on a significant number of painters up to the present time.

The struggle of the Nineteenth century painters was fought around the use of colour,
paint application, subject matter and content, surface and pictorial space. Their struggle
extended to the whole concept of what a painting was and how it was to be made.
Neither the materials nor their use was at the forefront of the changes, nor were they
exclusively instrumental in effecting them. The use and application of materials, by the
painters who considered themselves the new wave, however, was concomitant with the
exploration and expression of new meanings within painting. The role of materials has
also developed from being a transparent adjunct to representation constituting an
important part of the painting in their own right. In the process materials have acquired
nuances and meanings that are specific to themselves and are inherent in their use and
application. Materials are considered (by some authors at least) as having an seminal role
and influence in the making of a work as opposed to being only a conduit for meaning.

At the time of the 1855 Paris World Fair, interest in the surface per se in Academic
painting was largely eschewed for a concern with representation, which contained a large
element of didacticism and persuasion. As Gombrich writes on the surface as window:

what may make a painting like a distant view through a window is not the fact
that the two can be as indistinguishable as is a facsimile from the original: it is the
similarity of the mental activities both can arouse...³

The Academy of the 1855 Paris World Fair, as an institution of the state, reflected the
prevailing ideologies and power structure of the contemporary political reality. The
separation of line and colour had been debated for years within the Academy in the
context of proposed guidelines for painting. The line versus colour debate was central as
it was the manifestation of a power struggle between an art which reflected the values of
the powerful aristocracy and a more individual personal approach. The aristocratic
concern was with the passionless past, where the moral and ethical positions were clear
and could be employed to reinforce and celebrate the existing power structure. All this
was threatened by Delacroix's romanticism. It was feared that a foregrounding of
individual experiences and interpretations would foster a movement towards a more
democratic political system.

The classic tradition of Academic painting inculcated the unchanging moral and political
virtues of the regime. Although alluding to a different context and of a different visual
medium, John Berger's comment about the paralysing impact of publicity is relevant here,
highlighting the dynamic of Neo classicism:

Publicity, situated in the future continually deferred, excludes the present and so
eliminates all becoming, all development. Experience is impossible within it. All
that happens, happens outside it. ⁴
The drawing based composition of smoothed out tonally based forms positioned the viewer so as to be most receptive to paintings specific moral and ethical virtues. David’s ‘The Sabine Women’ is an excellent example of this characteristic. As well as moral values, heroic and classical virtues are also evident in the work. The work was meant to be known through an understanding of these values not through an experience of the painting itself. Changing these pictorial elements suggested a position that eroded the foundations of the hierarchal structure of the society. Delacroix’s “Liberty at the Barricades”, by contrast, not only depicts some of the drama of a contemporary revolution but also espouses very different political and social beliefs.

The licked manner of paint application was directed towards encouraging the viewer to overlook any immediate experience and the meanings associated with surface in favour of the known iconic and symbolic meanings and values of depicted subjects. The representation was the repository of meaning. Meaning and beauty resided in the representation rather than the manner of construction. This encouraged allegorical or narrative paintings of moral themes such as David’s “Oath of the Horatii” and “Marcus Brutus” and an emphasis on skill of depiction. The solidity of objects was perceived as concrete and clear as that of the meaning garnered from the painting. The Academy’s dislike for Delacroix’s ignoble and common subject matter was fuelled by their fear of the democratisation of the political process and the possibility of another revolution against authority in government and in art. It was also opposed to Delacroix’s forsaking of the “perfect human figure”-to say nothing of the fact that he privileged sentiment over reason. The cartoon simplifies the opposing attitudes into slogans but it does encapsulate two methods of painting which can be polarised in many ways: reason and emotion; form
David. Jacques Louis. The Sabine Women 1799 Louvre, Paris
and colour or distance and immediacy.

Drawing has long been considered as the basis for painting. To be a good draughtsman was the ultimate accolade for an artist. The traditional and universal emphasis on line was founded on many beliefs that are not all of concern here. The painter's manner of working, however, particularly when it is based on line, is of concern. An Academic painting was completed in two fairly distinct and separate phases. The first phase was that of the cartoon whereby the image was resolved as a two dimensional composition. This was drawn or composed using figure studies and preparatory sketches. The second was that of executing or rendering, whereby the image was polished usually without any major change to the preliminary stage. The uniformity of the technical procedure engendered a style which came to be seen as the truest way of representing the way things were. The reductive uniformity of the technical procedure and style and its widespread acceptance spawned the notion of the transparent surface.

Line is, of course, a convention, an intellectual construct. Working solely with line places great emphasis on the object in the form of outlines, shape and the edge generally, isolating it from its context. It disturbs the surface as little as possible, whilst organising it in a two dimensional manner. Organisation of the surface will be considered in more detail in a later chapter titled, The Constructed Surface.

Line, too, being well suited for the depiction of the shape of an object tended to assume a precedence over other visual elements. Compared with tone and colour, shape is the most stable and least variable formal element of the visible world. As a key tool of taxonomy shape lends itself to classifying, numbering and ordering of painterly elements
into hierarchical groups. Line on the other hand is an ideal tool for geometric representation and the unique European invention of linear perspective is closely related to this dominance of line over colour and shape. The invention of perspective had complex consequences as it is a concept imposed on the world. With perspective, conceptual speculation takes over from the tangible and certainty gives way to hypothesis. As a method of hierarchically organising and structuring the world from a single viewpoint, the device of perspectival representation, it is unparalleled in the Western tradition.

The geometric plan of perspective was based on order and hierarchy and hence augmented social and political structures. It allowed the deliberate positioning of people, buildings, events in a manner that would reinforce these qualities. Objects can be precisely placed in the visual environment to accord with their perceived status and rank. Perspective allows the picture to be constructed like a blueprint, on which the pictorial elements can be placed in already determined positions. Paradoxically, although it is a method for creating space, it proceeds from a determinedly two dimensional basis. The constructive approach continues with the composition of the figures and other elements. When the composition was fixed the picture was to a degree filled in-tonally modelled-with little emphasis on colour, texture or surface. This abstract schema, so carefully calculated, was eminently suitable for mirroring established social and political hierarchies.

Outline drawing, with its complete emphasis on shape, flattens form and eliminates elements associated with the total experience of the object like tone, colour or texture. What remains, when these experiences of perception are eliminated, is an object without
physical or experiential attributes - an ideal and cerebral object. As a cultural ideal, drawing possessed all the inevitability and weight of other social institutions, free from dissident notions. As a procedure drawing encouraged a fundamental separation of the different objects perceived within the field of vision. In so doing, drawing orders, controls and structures the relationships between objects. The elimination of all visual background noise sets the outlined object in the world of the imagined ideal. Many classical drawing studies show a single figure not only isolated from the world but isolated on the paper. David’s “Princess Murat and Pauline Borghese” is a fairly typical example. Drawing implies a standard which can only be appreciated by an act of cerebral reasoning that reveals a truth free from the personal, idiosyncratic and interpretative and hence subject to political and social structures. The underlying structure of the work and the transparency of the materials positions the viewer to understand the work from a reasoned cultural perspective.

Contour - the closest thing to an outline in nature-is, perceptually, an imperfect manner of representation. Even within a single object it is blurred, lost and highlighted, depending on adjacent colours and tones. A real life object is not always clearly defined by its contours, but merges with and re-emerges from its surroundings. As an element of art outline, unlike colour and tone, makes no attempt to mimic what the eye sees, but rather what the mind knows. As an intellectual artifice it aims to anchor things and fix their place in the world. Marion Milner, a psycho-analyst, used herself as a subject in attempting to grapple with the difficulties of learning to paint. She turned to free drawings and her comments are relevant here. In her view the outline represented the world of fact and to rely on it was to deny the world of the imagination:
So I could only suppose that, in one part of the mind, there really could be a fear of losing all sense of separating boundaries; particularly the boundaries between the tangible realities of the external world and the imaginative realities of the inner world of feeling and idea; in fact a fear of being mad. This same fear was to appear again in connection with the imaginative perception of action in nature, the fear of letting go common sense appearances and letting in madness. I wondered, perhaps, whether this was one reason why new experiments in painting can arouse such fierce opposition and anger. People must surely be afraid, without knowing it, that their hold on reason and sanity is precarious, else they would not so resent being asked to look at visual experiences in a new way, they would not be so afraid of not seeing the world as they have always seen it and in the general publicly agreed way of seeing it.  

Arguably this fear of losing the outline was analogous to the aristocratic fear at the erosion of the edges of their structured world by the developing democratic consciousness. Following the thrust of Marion Milner's thought, outline is symptomatic of the need to control the chaotic forces that threaten the structure of society. Unleashing or encouraging these forces could lead to madness both as an individual or a society. In the turbulent times of mid Nineteenth century France, a society anxious to preserve hereditary privileges and power was opposed to such influences. Every effort was made by the ruling elite to preserve privileges in all areas, giving great significance to control, rationality and the abstract. As an example of this Delacroix was not granted membership of the Academy and hence not accorded the patronage he deserved.

The economy of line focussed artists' attention on the work’s conception, shape and the
two dimensional disposition of the forms on the ground. The procedure of drawing cartoons has been used from the time of the Renaissance. The continuance of the process relates to its importance and centrality to the role of painting at that time. It also partially explains the bitterness of the dispute between Ingres and Delacroix. For Ingres and the Academy painters, the drawing and composition was not only the first step but the most important part of the painting and the major decisions concerning the work were resolved at this stage. This procedure relegates materials to a secondary position and places minimal significance on surface materiality.

Paintings produced at the time of the Paris World Fair in 1855 for the Academy might now be considered sterile and empty. Academic drawing was taught by the repetition of ideal outline drawings not based on observation or the experience of knowing through seeing. Elucidating the mimetic qualities of painting, Christopher Allen, specifically singles out the Academic paintings of this period:

The point is rather that art in the early modern period formed the ambition also to represent or 'imitate' the objective form of visual phenomena. This ambition, often regarded as naive in more recent times, was the expression of the characteristically modern European engagement with the practical world which gave birth to science. ... Oddly, if there was a time when the ambition of objective mimesis became naive, it was in the nineteenth century, when academic art became the image of the world of objects and commodities. 8

It is hardly necessary to point out that the "objects and commodities" represented in Academic painting illustrated the economic wealth and hence political power of the
ruling class. It was these paintings of “objects and commodities” that John Berger had in mind when he wrote:

What distinguishes oil painting from any other form of painting is its ability to render the tangible, the texture, the lustre, the solidity of what it depicts. It defines the real as that which you can put your hands on. Although its painted images are two dimensional, its potential for illusionism is far greater than that of sculpture, for it can suggest objects possessing colour, texture and temperature, filling a space and, by implication, filling the whole world. ⁹

Berger interprets this quality of oil paints as potentially reflecting the ultimate capitalist objectives - property, ownership and possession.

Colour was to be one catalyst which allowed the emergence of materials as a force in painting. Colour is associated with the experiential, tactile and emotional areas of painting. Understanding colour was part of the tremendous diversity of scientific research that was being undertaken in the early part of the nineteenth century. New, more permanent and relatively cheaper dyestuffs were discovered which revolutionised the visual environment on many levels. As an example, the drab colours of the clothes worn by the general populace, were to slowly change with profound effects. Manlio Brusatin suggests the fears of the ruling class in the colour versus line debate: “When people began to see and dress in different color, they began to think differently as well.”¹⁰

Research into new chemical dyes, pigments and their increased performance also stimulated theories related to perception. The French chemist Michel-Eugène Chevreul
noted the effects of adjacent colours on colour perception. His writings were studied by Delacroix and many of the Impressionists who then applied these theories in their exploration of light effects in landscape painting. Prior to this, light on objects was used to illuminate and reveal, but with the Impressionists it was used to suffuse both forms and eventually the picture as a whole. Eventually it became a dominant factor in the total and tangible experience of the painting and its meaning.

Pigment technology not only changed the quality of artists colours available, it also altered the composition and body of paints. The new paint technology permitted new possibilities of application, handling and meaning, which could be more immediate and experiential. This in turn permitted an interpretation of subject matter in a manner appropriate to the possibilities of the paints eg. rapid drying time, mixing of colour, wet into wet, and allowed the introduction of previously unconsidered subject matter. The subject matter of the non Academicians, was disassociated itself from the concerns of the Academy. These painters looked at the world around them, reacting to events as they saw and understood them. Gericault’s “Raft of the Medusa”, exhibited at the Academy in 1819, was a forerunner of this tendency as were the paintings Delacroix completed after his travels in Morocco.

The landscape up until Delacroix’s time was usually an incidental idealised element in French Academic paintings. Even Delacroix’s paintings were done in the studio, worked from sketches done in situ. It was the Impressionists who initially took painting out of the studio, directly into contact with nature. Landscape, free from contemporary social and political associations, provided an untamed chaotic subject that allowed painters to approach it without preconceptions and paint directly what they perceived.
Delacroix firmly believed that art could not be reduced to an intention or be an agent of propaganda, but on the contrary that the interaction of all the elements in a painting obliquely evoked a state of consciousness:

I confess my predilection for the silent arts, for those mute things of which Poussin made profession, as he said. Words are indiscreet, they break in on your tranquillity, solicit your attention and arouse discussion . . . .

The work of the painter and the sculptor is all of a piece like the works of nature. The author is not present in it and is not in communication with you like the writer or orator. He offers what might be called a tangible reality, which is however, full of mystery. This mute charm operates with the same force and seems to grow, every time that your eyes fall on the work.¹²

The implication here is that the work of art is to be experienced, not interpreted. Delacroix postulates a state distinct from language and culture. The author “is not present in it” and the mode of communication aims to avoid the distraction of words. What is offered is an experience. Such an experience of a “tangible reality” is obviously not effected through language or culture but involves a revelatory state of consciousness.

The social ideals, which reinforced the status quo and produced the bland reasoned academic art that Christopher Allen refers to above, were breaking down. Delacroix could say “The subject of painting is painting itself” and “The true subject of painting is inside yourself.” thus shifting the content and subject away from the ideal to the personal and the individual. The shift in emphasis from culturally conditioned line to colour was a change of consciousness that mirrored the evolving difference of the modern world and
with it, Modernism.

The objective element for these painters anticipating Modernism, came to be founded in the created world of the painting exemplified by materiality and surface vitality. This view was at odds with Academic painting where physical reality belonged to the objects represented. The picture surface, it must be remembered, was an immaterial or transparent plane. The experiences previously associated with activity in the tangible environment were constituted on the surface of the canvas through the subjective responses of the artist. The process of dodging the classical limitations begun by Delacroix continued unabated, leading to, among other destinations, Fauvism. Christopher Allen observed that Fauvism totally rejected the Academy teachings:

Mimesis, we might say, is global rather than piecemeal. Artists have recognised this in practice. But it also, and fundamentally, requires the means of reference to reality beyond its system of forms and colours. This was, in early modern Europe, the purpose of a technology of draughtsmanship (including perspective and anatomy) and colour (including tone and shade), which served to constitute the objective world of the modern imagination. It was this technology, already undermined by Impressionism and Post Impressionism, which Fauvism systematically rejected.¹³

Before Modernism the painter and surface were all but non existent in the finished painting. The overturning of the Academic process allowed painters and their bodies to become recognised as part of the painting process. The experiential element of the painting first expressed through the use of colour was an important factor in the
emergence of somatic elements of modern painting.

One of the essential characteristics of Academic painting was the obliteration of the body (and all that is associated with the body) as a source of the image. Norman Bryson elaborates this point:

Western painting is predicated on the disavowal of the deictic reference, on the disappearance of the body as a site of the image: and this is twice over: for the painter, and then for the viewing subject. Here the position of the painting is asymmetrical with that of the photograph, for photography is a product of a chemical process occurring in the same spatial and temporal vicinity as the event it records. . . . . 14

Photography is of great importance to 19th Century painting. It allowed Manet to "copy" nature with mechanistic fidelity, as if he were producing the equivalent of a photograph" as Richard Shiff writes. Also the cut off effect of photographs gave painters like Degas, a manner of composing which indicated a stronger sense of the visual world and a greater immediacy induced by the arbitrary nature of the edges of the scene.

Bryson goes on to contrast a European painting with Chinese painting where the emphasis is on chi or spirit, where the making of the work remains in the traces of the process and "the body of labour is on constant display." He further notes that oil paint is essentially an erasive medium, removing not only the ground but also its own tracks as well in its progress to completion. The viewer's awareness of the painter's body in the process is also erased. The smoothed out, undeviatingly flat polished surface is the outward manifestation of the painter's somatic absence. Bryson continues;
This existence of the image in its own time, of duration, of practice, of the body, is negated by never referring the marks on the canvas to their place in the vanished sequence of local inspirations, but only to the twin axes of a temporality outside durée: on the one hand, the moment of origin, of the founding perception; and on the other, the moment of closure, of the receptive passivity: to the transcendent temporality of the Gaze.

The Gaze, as characterised by Bryson, is the body reduced to disembodied opticality.

The moment of viewing is valorised as that moment the “eye contemplates the world alone, in severance from the material body of labour: the body is reduced to its optical anatomy....” The disembodied eye combined with the speed of recognition makes for an intellectual not an experiential understanding. Ingres can be seen as epitomising this approach; his paintings being the representation of an ideal moment, frozen in time and abstracted from life into an ideal form.

The viewing of an Ingres painting, as a total experience of relevance, is subverted by recognition. Following recognition, the process of categorisation is a centripetal one, which reduces the image to a ordained one, and knowledge into the classification of unrelated elements. The interpretation of the painting is only open to those areas of the mind associated with sequential learned meanings. All trace of the individual paint application and the meanings that permeate the painter’s idiosyncratic method of application and working the paint is eliminated in the process of application. The surface becomes impervious and intangible, and, to all purposes, invisible as it assumes a subordinate position in relation to the representation. The urge for “objective mimesis”
to use Christopher Allen’s words, largely excludes traces of the process, the body and the materials from the making and completely from the viewing experience.

As a consequence an autonomous manner of seeing that is available through art is minimised and although the reality of the painting does not cease to exist, the experience of it, does. Under these conditions, any understanding excludes the possibility of intuition and non-verbal modes of understanding being exercised. The concept of an equivalence of thinking and feeling is nullified. The time duration is significant insofar as it reflects a swift cognitive mode of regarding a painting. Its modus operandi is located within the area of information gained through the intellect or reason.

To allow for bodily understanding\textsuperscript{15} more time must be allowed before the image is partly recognised and categorised. Alternative modes of understanding have to be given the time to operate in the perception process. It is a process of giving consideration to what it there. Paul Valery suggests as much, when he described poetry as “the prolonged hesitation between meaning and sound.” Responding to the work in this way the viewer ceases to be an outsider, a voyeur, and becomes involved with the work-allowing it to take control of the viewing experience. Bryson propounds another way of seeing which involves the Glance.

As the eye traverses the canvas, the path of its movement is irregular, unpredictable, and intermittent; and though, through its traversals, the Glance will gradually build up a conceptual version of the compositional structures, these cannot be taken in by the Glance; they are not disclosed during the actual time of the Glance, but exist on either side, before the Glance and after it: before, in that
information yielded to the present Glance is back-projected into the sum of inferences concerning composition which has accumulated so far; after, in that process of accumulation means that full apprehension of the compositional order is always postponed.16

This manner of viewing, being referential and associative, allows for an exploration of meaning through associations and correspondences with a great variety of diverse sensory and cognitive stimulation. A similar stimulation at a later date might refer the viewer back to a painting previously seen, to continue the process of exploration. Through this process understanding of the work's conceptual core is not explanatory but is random and accords with the capabilities of the viewer.

Working directly from nature as the Impressionists did, had the advantage of side stepping culturally determined attitudes. It also followed Delacroix's belief that nature should be used as a source of imagery through which painters could externalise their own internal states. Delacroix's fascination with colour, movement and atmosphere not only led him away from the strictures of line but also induced his followers to abandon the concept of a pre-determined composition. Baudelaire, a great admirer of Delacroix, wrote:

These three elements necessarily demand a somewhat undecided contour, light and floating lines, and boldness of touch. Delacroix is the only artist today whose originality has not been invaded by the tyrannical system of straight lines; his figures are always restless and his draperies fluttering. From Delacroix's point of view the line does not exist; for however tenuous it may be, a teasing
geometrician may always suppose it thick enough to contain a thousand others:

and for colourists, who seek to imitate the eternal throbbing of nature, lines are
never anything else but the intimate fusion of two colours, as in the rainbow. 17

Seeking subject matter in the landscape not only distanced the Impressionists from
cultural attitudes but also caused them to re-evaluate their attitudes towards nature. By
painting directly from nature and attempting to depict the transient effects of light the
Impressionists were working more immediately and directly with their subject matter.
The composition of their paintings was executed through the process of depiction—it
became a history of their struggle. Compositional harmony was not solely based on the
disposition of forms but on a greater range of pictorial elements. Colour, tone, texture,
as well as more intangible elements like weight and dominance assumed greater
importance. Composition became part of a largely internal system of forms and colours
minimising references to external reality. In pursuing these goals the Impressionists,
replaced the tonal modelling of an earlier generation of painters with the brush stroke.

The shimmering light that is a characteristic of Impressionist paintings was effected as
much by the brush stroke as by colour. The brush strokes were constructed to emphasise
the surface as the light became solidified into daubs of textured colour. The resurgence
of surface, whilst emphasising the painting as object, also encouraged a contemplative
pondering of the picture surface at the expense of the dominance of representation.

In depicting light, the plein air landscape painters, by necessity, had to work quickly
putting down their impression before the light changed. The speed of execution was a
new element as they tried to capture what they saw in front of their easels before the
sensation faded. In reacting so quickly to their subject matter, reason was countered by reaction. The empathetic immediacy of their reaction to what was before them swamped any moral and political overtones of subject matter.

Thirty or forty years after the Paris World Fair the vitriolic debate over line and colour had all but subsided. Contemporary art had swung in the direction of colour, surface and expression-as part of a more general tendency to give primacy to nature over culture. Even the seemingly simple and innocent move to paint in the landscape had a lot to do with the conception of its opposition to the culture of cities. Although possibly not articulated in these terms the Impressionist fascination for landscape had a lot to do with the notion of exploring a new subject which was free of the weight of cultural meaning.

Landscape as a subject for painting in its own right had a limited place within the tradition of painting and had been swamped by the allegorical subject matter of the Academy. Landscape, especially when it is seen as light and colour, becomes the most ephemeral and transitory of subject matter. Any sense of physical reality of the subject matter becomes lost under the tiny dabs of paint that compose the physicality of the surface. This can be seen in Monet’s series of paintings of Rouen Cathedral where the solidity of the building is exploded into light. The two terms, landscape and nature, were almost synonymous at this juncture.

The constant references to working from nature and the almost transcendental importance given to it reached its zenith with Cézanne. For Cezanne nature was everything\textsuperscript{18}: subject, inspiration, teacher and solace. It is indicative of this tendency that few Impressionist paintings depict the then radical and visible industrialisation. The brush
stroke and the sketch, both of which were germane to the representation of the landscape, sanctioned the surface significance.

The painting surface as object, has always been claimed as one of the great characteristics of Modernism. Materiality and the surface was to become such a feature of Modernism that Clement Greenberg saw the unique qualities of painting as “the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment.” Depth or space behind the picture plane was banished. The integrity of the picture plane as a flat nonillusionistic surface was respected.

The Impressionist model was challenged by a new generation of painters including Cézanne, a seminal figure in the modern movement. Using Impressionist colour he worked largely in isolation in the south of France at Aix en Provence struggling with his “petit sensations” and his efforts to realise them in front of nature. His emphasis on perceptual sensations permitted him to make a radical change bringing emphasis to both the surface and to the internal structure of the painting. In the process painting moved away from perceived reality, overturned the long rule of perspective, brought the focus from behind the picture plane to the front. Cézanne’s colour modulated surfaces, with their uniform repetitive brush strokes and played on the interaction between the solidity of the forms and the experience of the surface.

The first non representational painting was done only ten years after Cezanne’s death. As an example of his belief in the primacy of perception, when Emile Bernard asked Cezanne to clarify a point about sensation as feelings or as retinal impulses, he responded: “I don’t think you can distinguish between the two; however, as a painter, I
believe in the visual sensation above all else."20

What Cezanne felt in his visual sensations of nature refuted the hegemony of perspective and allowed the surface to assume a place of importance in the painting. If perspective was invented to allow the creation of space and depth Cézanne subverted its influence by becoming engrossed in what he saw and experienced. No longer was a picture a window, which had the ambivalent effect of exclusion and enticement for the viewer. Cezanne's picture was on the picture plane with a subsequent emphasis on the surface and the materials had forgone their previous transparent role. In a Cézanne painting:

Every brush-stroke that followed a fictive plane into fictive depth harked back-by reason of its abiding, unequivocal character as a mark made by a brush- to the physical fact of the medium; and the shape and placing of that mark recalled the shape and position of the flat rectangle which was being covered with pigment that came from tubes. (Cezanne wanted an “elevated” art, if anyone ever did, but he made no bones about the tangibility of the medium. “One has to be a painter through the very qualities of the medium.” he said. “One has to use coarse materials.”)21

Such a method, according to Greenberg, wrought havoc on the ideology of the Academy:

The little overlapping rectangles of paint, laid on with no attempt to fuse their dividing edges, drew the depicted forms towards the surface while, at the same time, the modelling and contouring of these forms, as achieved by the paint dabs, pulled them back again into illusionistic depth. The result was a never-ending
vibration from front to back and back to front. The old masters had generally sought to avoid effects like this by blending their brush-strokes and covering the surface with glazes to create a neutral, translucent texture through which the illusion could glow with the least acknowledgment of the medium- *ars est artem celare*. This is not to say, however, that they paid no heed at all to the surface pattern, they did. But given their different aim, they put a different, less obvious yet less ambiguous emphasis on it. Cezanne, in spite of himself, was trying to give the picture surface its due as a physical entity. The old masters had conceived it more abstractly.22

Yet there was something else that made Cézanne an exemplary modern painter and that was his struggle. The certainty of the Academic painters, even the limpid confidence of the bourgeois Impressionists was conspicuously lacking in Cézanne. His life was one of frustrations, doubts and frantic rages. He came to the canvas with a motif, but not a subject and his struggle was enacted through the process of making. With Cezanne the surface attained an opacity and physicality because reality was read within the surface. The uniqueness of the individual painter and the atypical specificity of the brush mark encompass the meanings which reside in the opacity of the surface. Clement Greenberg on the other hand noted that:

> On the verge of middle age Cezanne had the crucial revelation of the artist's mission; yet what he *thought* as revealed was in good part inconsistent with the means he was already developing under the impact of the revelation. The problematic quality of his art- the source perhaps of its unfailing modernity-and of which he himself was aware, comes from
the ultimate necessity of revising his intentions under the pressure of a
style that evolved as if in opposition to his conscious aims. 23

Cézanne's admiration for the classical masters, particularly Poussin, was at odds with his emphasis of working with his motif, the landscape. Cézanne approached the landscape without an intention to impose a structure, but to understand and represent the sensations he received from it and in so doing find the image.

In the following chapters I will consider the various surfaces that have evolved in response to the changing emphases of Modernist painters. These have been broadly described as expressive, material, constructed and unworked.

1. *Phenomenology of Perception*. p316
2. Reproduced in *The History of Impressionism* p21
3. *Illusion in Nature and Art* p 240
4. *Ways of Seeing* p153
5. We still use form in the sense of 'good form' to mean the correct social way to behave. The forms of society extended to manners, language, as well as moral and ethical behaviour.
7. *On Not Being Able to Paint* p 17
9. *Ways of Seeing* p88
10. *A History of Colors* p117
11. Even in this period there was a strong interest in the primitive. Ingres was part of this trend but his interest was in the Italian primitives. Delacroix's interest in Morocco had no ethnographic rigour at all. But this subject matter, being exotic and contemporary, was unfettered by the codes and cultural practices of Europe. It was 'foreign' in more ways than one.


14. *Vision and Painting* p 89

15. The notion that perception includes all the senses is something that has been put forward many times. Merleau-Ponty writes in *Primacy of Perception* (p5) "Descartes once said profoundly the soul is not merely in the body like a pilot in his ship; it is wholly intermingled with the body. The body, in turn, is wholly animated and all its functions contribute to the perception of objects-an activity long considered by philosophy to be pure knowledge."

16. *Vision and Painting* p 121

17. *Language of Images* The Salon of 1846 p59

18. "The landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness." Merleau-Ponty quotes Cezanne as saying in *Cezanne Doubt*

19. All other traditions always strove to adhere to the non illusionistic integrity of the picture plane. Illusion on all level was eschewed. It is as typical of Indian sculpture as it is of Chinese ink paintings that the materials are not pressed into service to look like something else. This is extremely paradoxical as it was the European tradition that struggled for so long with the representation of deities and the possibility of idolatry—which was not a concern in Asia.

20. *Cézanne by Himself* ed Richard Kendall p289


22. *Cezanne in Perspective* p132

23. *Cezanne in Perspective* p131
There is NO p. 94 in original document
The Expressionist outlook is characterised by the following qualities, more or less.

1. The attempt to reduce the interpretation of nature or life in general to the rawest emotional elements.
2. A complete and utter dependence on pigment as an expressive agent rather than an imitative or descriptive one.
3. An intensity of vision which tries to catch the throb of life, necessarily doing violence to external facts to lay bare internal facts.1

The notion of the expressive in painting is closely linked to ideas about colour, technique and the manner of painting. Colour, as noted earlier in relation to Delacroix, was considered as the emotional opposite to rational line, and as such, came under the aegis of Nature. The experience of working directly from the subject encouraged idiosyncratic and psychological colour interpretations. Derain and Munch, in different ways, typified this tendency. Landscape, the dominant subject matter of the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, engendered a multifaceted approach to colour treatment.

The vitality and expressiveness of primitive art, which was slowly becoming known in Europe in the late C19th, further encouraged the expressive tendency. The apparent
crude ness of Impressionist works was part of the images expressive presence and power. If one word could be used to describe the expressive approach it would most likely be "immediate." Speed of execution, unmodified marks unmixed colours and the resultant brushstroke were some of the means adopted to achieve material immediacy in the surface. The Expressionist painters of Die Brücke group, for example, attempted to express their reactions through their brushstrokes before they were modified by convention and culture.

The pendulum soon swung away from the vibrant shimmering surface of Impressionism but dissident painters, like Gauguin, Cezanne and later the Fauves, as diffuse and different as their aims were, generally adhered to the Impressionist colour palette and love of landscape. Neo-Impressionists attempted to return to some sort of formal and compositional structure and as such, their dissatisfaction with Impressionism, grew out of the historical painterly tradition. Other reactions from van Gogh and the German Expressionists were less cerebral and reasoned in their construction. They came in the form of an obsessive concern with expression in painting at the expense of other values of the art tradition. As a pan-European tendency, this expressive emphasis occurred independently in Paris, Oslo, Munich and Dresden.

Van Gogh

Van Gogh's life and paintings revealed certain tendencies of the brush stroke, the surface and expression, that were to become hallmarks of the Expressionist movement. In a few short years at Arles (1888-1890) Van Gogh was to produce a body of work which overturned the optimistic lyricism of Impressionism. Van Gogh's early paintings
show perspective broken down through an exaggeration of linear perspective allied with the emphasis on surface and brushstroke. Van Gogh's intention was to articulate, not mimetic representation, but the experience of the space itself. Even strokes swirl to form, producing a unifying texture on the encrusted surface. Every part of the surface is differentiated by varied brushstrokes, separating figure from ground. These marks built, not only surfaces, but the spaces between objects. The surface density that Cezanne achieved through sensation and colour relationships, Van Gogh recreates through the extremity of the expressivity, replete in surface and paint. The tactility of the paint moulded the subject, predominantly landscape, as if it were clay.

Van Gogh's sole concern was to achieve a synthesis between the intensity of his vision and the painted surface. The paint application was as simple and even, as is possible. Mimetic considerations were not entirely abandoned but were secondary to his experience of the subject and expression. Distortion of form or colour was dictated by an expressive intent with any definitive depiction of them obscured. The role of the paint in linking the different forms together, through impasto, arbitrary use of colour, forced perspective and expressive space on the surface, were immensely potent factors. The energy and movement that are as tangible as the tactile paint, express an exaltation before nature. For Van Gogh nature was the cause of all effects, and as such, nature was energy. The paint takes the role of a physical simulation of the frenetic energy of nature and the expressive aspect of intangible space. This quality to some degree informs expressionist work and particularly expressionist brushstroke.

A description of the brushstrokes of a contemporary expressionist painter, Georg
Baselitz, are similarly described:

The phenomenon of classical expressionist brush stroke offers another approach to the seemingly hidden reality suggested by this unusual typography. Since 1962 (but with increased intensity since 1974) Baselitz’s work has conspicuously featured the separately distinguishable brush stroke, usually applied, in the artist’s own words, with “great speed.” In part this demonstrates his kinship with the Abstract Expressionists, some at least of whom are famous for working very quickly, featuring the sense of living muscularity of the brush stroke, and denying that content was the point of their work. Like Clifford Still, Willem de Kooning, and other American artists of that generation whom Baselitz admires, his brush strokes create an atmosphere that seems charged with meaning even without any particular act of representation required. The point is that the mark of the brush, when emphasised and foregrounded in the mode known as Expressionist, is more than a formal element; it carries evidences of energy, will and presence which are themselves elements of content. Conceived as events in space, Baselitz’s brush marks are like forces in the air that both surround the represented “objects”? , move through them like wind, and constitute them like the elements of their being.

In a metaphysical sense the individual brush stroke evokes the smallest entities of which a world is made-atoms, point monads, moments of perception, traces of movements of sensibility, and so on. In Baslelitz's work the aggregations of these minima vary in significant ways. Differences in densities of marks, for example,
are apt to distinguish figure from ground (a tacit acknowledgment of the act of representation), creating different feelings of inside and outside. The storm of brush strokes, within the outline of a "thing"?, constituting its shape, suggests the ontological forces flowing within an entity and giving it the power to be, the raw electrical surging which enables life, the intensity and reality of the internal nature of the "thing".

The latter sentence touches on qualities and concepts which were not only admired by expressionist painters but also attributed to primitive works. Primitivism also, was a very strong influence on expressionist works. The Primitivism of pre-war Europe became the repository for many ideas of an expressionist nature and conversely the European discovery of primitive art nurtured the development of expressionism. One important aspect of Primitivism, as related to primitive art, was its apparent crudeness and vitality of execution. This had a strong and immediate effect on the manner of handling materials and hence on the surface of an Expressionist painting. The belief in pure perception led many painters to an immediacy of reaction to visual stimulus. To achieve it, a direct unrestrained handling of the materials was adopted. Charles Harrison writes of some of the values and criteria of expressive and Expressionist painting:

"It was seen to be expressive of much more than the subject-matter depicted; it was seen as clear evidence of the artist's physical and emotional involvement with the medium, of a rejection of sophisticated forms of artistic competence in pursuit of the direct expression of the artist's feelings or emotions onto the canvas."
In the Expressionism of Die Brücke it was believed there was no space for thought, only an intuitive, immediate or emotional response. Any suggestion of skilful techniques were spurned as techniques are, by necessity, culturally acquired and would act as a filter for the pure expression aimed for. The handling that is natural to the particular painter is the most appropriate one.5

Here perception and somatic influences join forces with the materials in the making. The three elements combine to form what Shiff has referred to in terms more akin to those of a performance.6 A handling of materials that is neither contrived nor depends on conditioning involves a metaphoric leap back to a state that is pre cultural- that is, of a primordial nature. This handling is sovereign, direct, unmodified and with brushstrokes which draw more attention to themselves than the object they are representing.

An Expressionist surface aims to be unsophisticated, gauche and unrefined. The unmodified gouges and careless inking of Kirchner’s graphic work show this tendency even more than his paintings. Brushstrokes are unworked autonomous marks left in all their immediate, unconsidered awkwardness. The surface loses the homogeneity of a representational image, as it disintegrates into a series of marks which build up the meaning. The viewer becomes more aware of the surface. The painting edges more towards the state of being an object in its own right, which allows the formal elements of the work-the materials and colour-to be considered independently of the subject. As Christopher Allen remarked of the highly visible brushstrokes of the Fauves:

At the same time the very artificiality of colour and often composition, the
brushwork left deliberately visible—marks placed side by side but not joined or blended—remind us that the picture is also a pattern of colours and forms on a flat canvas. There is, in other words, an objective side to this work, but it is in the constitution of an artificial object rather than in imitation of a natural one.  

Painting had attained a degree of independence, as an object, that had never been previously realised.

Expressionism underpinned much subsequent modernist painting, including the French Fauves, who exhibited at the Salon in 1905, and in Germany Die Brücke and Blaue Reiter groups, in Dresden and Munich respectively, brought together several strands of thought that impacted dramatically on materials and the meanings associated with their use. The attitude of these two groups could perhaps be summarised by quoting one of the most influential theorists of the Blaue Reiter, Franz Marc. in a letter to another group member, Auguste Macke, Marc wrote:

We must be brave and turn our backs upon almost everything that until now good Europeans like ourselves, thought precious and indispensable. Our ideas and our ideals must be clad in hair shirts, they must be fed on locusts and honey, not on history, if we are ever to escape from the exhaustion of our European bad taste. 

The allusion to the desert fathers not only betrays their spiritual leaning but the belief in the value of returning to the primordial beginning, hence avoiding “European bad taste”
The development of their ideals had to be accomplished without any assistance from their tradition, which it is implied, was bad taste.

Nostalgia for a golden classical age was given stimulus by Europe's contact with the New World from the fifteenth century. At the end of the eighteenth century the French social philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau put forward the theory that primitive or natural man was virtuous and that society, as it existed now, corrupted the individual. Orientalism, a forerunner to Primitivism, was an exotic aspect of the French Academy. The otherness of the subject matter was absorbed into an understood manner of representation so nullifying its difference and power. Orientalism's stance was that of the tourist. It appropriated the unfamiliar of the colonies and made it acceptable for domestic consumption. The painting by John Frederick Laws "The Hhareem", recently shown in the exhibition Orientalism: Delacroix to Klee at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, is a good example.

Primitivism

Primitivism is a concept which only became strongly influential as industrialisation developed. Primitive objects were prized as emblems of the attributes of Primitivism. The movement presented a European construct of otherness for its own gratification. So as Goldwater\textsuperscript{10} notes Benin bronzes were known in Europe as early as 1897 but were largely ignored as they were too naturalistic, too technically proficient to accord with the notion of the primitive.

The concept of the primitive flourished as an antidote to the widespread notion of the
decadence of a culture that had lost basic and important values as result of industrialisation. Much of the unease in response to the rapid industrial and social progress that was taking place, was countered in the notion of Primitivism. There arose a form of cultural primitivism, whereby people living in a highly complex industrial culture believed that life in primitive cultures was less sophisticated and so imparted a more vital sense of being. In whatever form it was envisaged, the primitive was always regarded as more instinctive, less constrained by convention and so closer to nature. As such the primitive was somehow closer to fundamental aspects of human existence and being.

Donald Kuspit notes that the concept of European decadence was widespread early in the eighteenth century. He comments on the fact that nature, transcendence and art itself have all occupied the position of "fullness" in opposition to the emptiness of society. In a sense the pioneering avant-garde artists were unconsciously searching for sources of fullness other than society, which generally seemed unfulfilling to them. Where Monet, Gaugin Van Gogh and Cezanne found a new source of fulfilment in instinctive reciprocity with nature (however different their perceptions of it), Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian found fulfilment through transcendence of both nature and society. In a sense, such transcendence was fulfilling in itself. Certainly the art of all of them is informed by a sense of conflict and oscillation between the sense of the world as empty and art as full. In general, the dialectic of fullness and emptiness is a major factor in the development of avant-garde art.¹¹
The values of fullness and emptiness, which changed and varied as they were given new valances, influenced the attitudes and techniques of painters from Courbet to Tapies.

Most European conceptions of a civilisation, organisation, refinement and technology were seen to be lacking in primitive society. These attributed ideas were then used as a means of challenging the assumptions of European society and in so doing painters sharply differentiated themselves from the values of the industrial world. For a society that considers the individual in terms of his/her rational abilities, the primitive was seen as a savage (OED: uncultivated, fierce, cruel: uncivilised, living in a primitive state), lacking all values, morals and ethics. If, however, the individual is conceived in terms of a relationship with nature, then the aim is to rescue it from spiritual chaos induced by materialistic industrialism, by leading society back to the tranquillity, compatibility and unity of nature. These characteristics are fairly constant in the notion of Primitivism.

*Nature*-in all the diverse and disparate nuances (OED: things essential qualities: inherent impulses determining character: vital force; physical power causing world: condition of man before society is organised, uncivilised, uncultivated or undomesticated) of the word-and the *primitive* were to some degree synonymous.

Over time Primitivism began to include all those seen as outsiders -prostitutes, criminals, circus people and the insane. It was also believed that women were closer to nature, hence the many paintings depicting women as nature or nurturer. But a far more important reason was the belief that women were essentially instinctive and closer to nature. Simplistically, women were thought of as nature and men as culture.
Primitivism valued the simple, the intuitive, and the instinctive under the umbrella of Nature. Nature was allied to the redemption of society and this generated a critical potential for a different manner of modernity. The literal escape from civilisation into nature, which began with the Impressionists, continued at Arles, Pont Aven, Aix en Provence, Murnau and Nidden. Like the earlier German and English Romantic painters, the Expressionists also renounced the world of the urban metropolis and sought out the most isolated and wild parts of the natural environment. The more remote and elemental it was, the more it was in accord with their conception of nature as a primordial life force. They leaned towards an animistic view of nature. Both Kandinsky and Nolde espoused a holistic attitude to nature, as a vital organic system, that was based on ecstatic communion. Colin Rhodes links this tendency with a kind of mystical perception:

The animistic sensibility is related to attempts to return to a more primitive way of seeing, or what has sometimes been called ‘primary vision’, as opposed to ordinary adult perception that orders the world in utilitarian terms as a set of causes or means. Primary vision is a form of ‘pure’ perception that frees the artist from theoretical and practical concerns, allowing them to experience the immediate expressiveness of things-everything is presence and nothing is an it.

The regenerative belief in unspoilt nature extended to the peasant who was regarded as uncorrupted by materialism and the sophistication of the modern world. To be distanced from civilisation and immersed (even if only for brief periods) in the rural areas became linked to the possibility of the revitalising of the self and the wider culture. These words
by Colin Rhodes provide an excellent summary of the relationship of Primitivism to nature:

The attempt to throw off the restraints of cultural convention can be seen as a characteristic common to most artistic developments in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, we should only view such attempts in terms of Primitivism when the ideal that is raised against convention consists of a desire to rediscover less complex ways of living, or a yearning for the natural. *Nature, in this sense, was synonymous with the primitive-embracing a complex set of ideas, ranging from visions of the primordial landscape to the part of the human mind which was untouched by the learning process that one underwent in the 'civilised' West.* (Italics mine)\(^{14}\)

Europe was experiencing numerous back to nature movements particularly in Germany with the Die Brücke. Gill Perry writes of the many back to nature groups that were organised by artists, for example, Worpswede:

In his monograph on Worpswede, first published in 1903, Rainer Maria Rilke constructed a picture of these artists as neo romantics, conflating their youthful anti-academic Primitivism with a spiritual quest, “seeking something meaningful in the midst of uncertainty”. Like many German intellectuals of his era, Rilke saw the artist as engaged in a spiritual mission to repair a severed relationship with nature. \(^{15}\)
Nudism reflected the belief in the relative innocence of an unclothed body. The removal of clothing was a metaphor for the removal of the veneers of civilisation and culture. Nudity also represented the natural uninhibited sexuality that Primitivism and the primitive epitomised. Within German Expressionist paintings the naked figures lack the signifying codes of civilisation, revealing no social status. The women, for example, have no jewellery. Apart from the obvious sexual differences, the bodies of both male and female are treated similarly. Interaction between the figures is minimal and they lack any psychological characteristics: they are simply there in the landscape. However, they are fused with and entwined within it, both figure and nature being treated with the same broad direct brushstrokes.

There was considerable debate in Germany prior to the war about the political ambivalence of Expressionism concerning the value and relevance of folk art. The central question was whether the inspiration drawn from non European sources could subvert the values of European culture. Some critics believed that the movement unwittingly colluded with the "ideological decay of the Imperialist bourgeois" and, as such, only succeeded in creating a pseudo form of opposition. The Expressionists were vilified by the National Socialist party which helped their self image of heroic opposition to a decadent society.

Worringer, an influential writer on the national German style, attacked evolutionist theories of art which asserted European superiority in the context of a debate on German national identity and the rebirth of the German spirit. In his view the primitive came from:
Heckel, Erich. *Glassy Day (Bathing Woman by the Sea)*
1913 Oil on Canvas 120 x 96 cm M. Kruss Collection, Berlin

Nolde Emile. *Candle Dancers* 1912 Oil on Canvas
100 x 86.5 cm Ada & Emile Nolde Foundation, Seebüll
another kind of volition. . . . a volition concerned with large, elementary presuppositions, which we can hardly imagine from the standpoint of our present, moderated grasp of life.” In primitive societies Worringer argued, art was not a luxury but rather a vehicle of “elementary sensations of necessity” engaging with a level of reality beyond appearances. By drawing inspiration from non-European traditions which were “unsullied by knowledge and experience” modern artists could liberate themselves from “a rational way of seeing”, and transform the outward, literary symbolism that Vinnen understood as a national virtue into a new inner reality—thus freeing themselves from a contradictory relationship between descriptive form and symbolic content.¹⁹

Painters now reinforced the artificiality of painting, its non imitative quality, through the mode of application and the surface emphasis. The meanings that were possible to realise through manipulation of materials and independent experience and expression of the surface were now firmly positioned as important elements in a painting and its appreciation.

Emile Nolde a German Expressionist of Die Brücke, wrote:

Why is it we artists love to see the unsophisticated artefacts of the primitive?..... It is a sign of our times that every piece of pottery or dress or jewellery, every tool for living has to start with a blueprint.-- Primitive people begin making things with their fingers, with material in their hands. Their work expresses the pleasure of making. What we enjoy, probably, is the intense and often grotesque
expression of energy, and life. There is enough art around that is over-bred, pale and decadent.\(^{17}\)

All the major traditional cultural groupings were appropriated and incorporated into mainstream European art. They revitalised and revolutionised European art on a formal and technical level. But the roots of this philosophy had penetrated the European psyche well before the famous discovery by the early twentieth century French painters. Jacques Meuris wrote:

The organisers of the “Great International Exhibition of Industrial Products” held at the Victoria Regina Hall in London in 1851 had similar motives; they set hand-made objects alongside machine-made objects \([.....]\) to the detriment of the latter. At the time Henry Cole noted in his *Journal of Design* that the organisers wanted particularly to show “some of the Indian products that are almost unknown to us” in contrast to “the deadly facileness of manufactured ornamentation.”\(^{18}\)

A determination to avoid facileness led to a rejection of anything that was considered polished in both senses of the word. The relatively unworked quality of the materials— the thick, unmodified paint application— indicate a desire to avoid the confines of culture by mimicking the primitive and being as natural as possible.

An animistic relationship with materials, allowing them to express their meanings in the artistic process was fundamental to their beliefs. As noted in the comment by
Kandinsky, lack of academic training was a guarantee of authenticity. Skill interfered with true expression and authenticity. 19

The decline in the craft element of painting, that has occurred this century is a flow on effect of this notion. A component of the fascination with materials in Modernism was the search for materials that did not bear the imprint of any Western historical use. This made the painter freer in their use of these materials. Without a tradition of use the painters felt unfettered in their approach and more emphasis was placed on the actual materials themselves.

1. Jacob Kainen “Our Expressionists” Art Front (New York) 3 (February 1937) 14-15. Quoted by Donald E Gordon Expressionism Art and Idea p195
2. In his fifteen months at Arles Van Gogh produced 200 hundred paintings and over 100 drawings and watercolours.
3. The Exiles Return p128
4. Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction p63
5. Kandinsky wrote on the question of form “If a man without academic training, free of objective artistic knowledge paints something, he never produces an empty sham. . . the works produced are not dead, but living.” Blaue Reiter p176 This is also reflected in Kandinsky's notion of “inner necessity.”
6. See “Working the Surface.” Endnote 4
8. Blaue Reiter p127
9. Watercolour 47 x 67.3 Victoria & Albert Museum 1850
10. Primitivism in Modern Art p43
11. The Cult of Avant Garde p151
12. Animism was seen by Freud as an early stage in the development towards a scientific view of the world.
13. Primitivism and Modern Art p159-160
14. *Primivitism and Modern Art* p67. This book together with Goldwater’s *Primivitism in Modern Art* has been consulted widely and some of the terminology and ideas of both authors have been broadly adopted.

15. *Expressionism reassessed* ‘The ascent to nature- some metaphors of Nature in early expressionist art.’ p58

16. The Kirchner in the Art Gallery of New South Wales is a good example of this. The three female figures are generalised, similar and as gender unspecific as possible. Their unity and concordance with the waves could hardly be more emphasised.

17. *German Expressionism* Introduction.

18. The paradox of the Expressionist movement is indicated by the fact that Emic Nolde joined the Danish branch of the National Socialist Party. His work was also scorned along with the other Expressionists in the Degenerate Art Exhibition.

19. *German Expressionism* p57 Worringer’s book is often quoted but to my knowledge not translated from the German.

17. *Theories of Modern Art*. P150-151

18. *Cultures* Vol 4 No. 4 1977 p74

19. See Kandinsky comment in Endnote 5 above.
Matter as Surface

...a number of European artists focussed on the organic material itself as an analogy for the processes of history. In such work, messiness and dissolutions not only bespeak the formal and philosophical ruptures in modern art, but evoke the fractures in human life, experience and perception engendered by the horrors of World War II. Buzz Spector

On both sides of the Atlantic in the aftermath of World War II there was a flourish of interest in painting materials and in the materiality in painting. The related but nevertheless distinct movements in Europe and America had different rationales. The pan European phenomenon was characterised by a complex and diverse interest in materials for their own sake and was more concerned with the basic matter of the built environment. The phenomenon in America was involved with paints for commerce and in a very different context, and will be considered later. The European phenomenon included many of the second generation modernists-of whom Tàpies was one. Indeed in 1950 Tàpies was in Paris on a French Government Scholarship and would have had some contact with the works of Fautrier, Dubuffet and others. The influence of Tàpies stay in Paris may well have stimulated him to return to more tactile interests manifested early in his career. What separates Tàpies, and to a large degree all the Spanish artists
involved at this time, was their physical isolation from the trauma of the World War.

In the first half of the 20th century Europe had been subjected to dreadful conflicts, on a scale that had never occurred before. Coupled with the unprecedented destruction the period had manifested a contempt for life and the values that European culture had prided itself on. The degradation of the social and human values intrinsic to Europe's belief in its cultural-and hence economic-superiority and was a major problem of the spirit for Europe at this time. As Robert Hughes analysed the concerns of this period:

There was a widespread feeling that almost any affirmation of substance, any act of will grating against the rubble of values destroyed or uprooted by the war, could form the rudiments of a new consciousness-an imagery of survival which could not (for decency's sake, as it were) allude, even wistfully, to the ordered satisfactions of the traditional French landscape of pleasure. One started with the basic protein of art: a clotted lump of paint. From this grew a mode of abstract painting, the thick soupy décor known as Tachisme-the French answer to Abstract Expressionism.²

The use of the materials was thus analogous to the trauma of the war; their untidiness and disintegration mirrored the formal and intellectual ruptures in modern art, as well as mirroring the schisms and upheavals of daily life, that were a result of the trauma. The disruption that had occurred in European life swept away all civilised cultural constructs that had been built on technological growth and economic surety. The social disruption laid bare the basis for urban life in a way that had not been known for many years. War time austerities banished all but the necessities of survival from daily life. It was in the context of an essential foundation, elemental matter, that the interest in materials arose.
On one level they were all that remained; on another they were the matter on which the future would be built.

After WWII many Paris based painters were moving, like Tàpies, to paint applied in a manner that strongly emphasised the medium's materiality. These included painters like Alfred Manessier, Serge Poliakoff and Jean Bazaine, all of whom were abstract painters, who were at the tail end of the tradition of constructing the picture in the manner of Cézanne. After World War II other Paris based painters like, Wols, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Jean Fautrier, Yves Klein; Jean Dubuffet and George Mathieu; the Cobra group Asger Jorn, Karel Appel and Pierre Alechinsky; Frank Auerbach, David Bomberg and Leon Kossof in England; the Italians Alberto Burri, Lucio Fontana, Emilio Vedova and in Japan the Gutai (the word actually means concrete, tangible) group had similar interests in materials. Even within Spain itself there was a small group of artists, Manolo Millares, Antonio Suara, Modesto Cuixart as well as Tàpies, who were attempting to redefine the materials and supports used in painting. Subsequently in the late sixties and early seventies, Italy spawned the arte povera movement. Developments from the papier collé of Braque and Picasso involved a different mode of making and will be explored later.

It would, however, be erroneous to lump all these painters together into a movement. Their use of materials was as diverse as their backgrounds and pictorial interests. Even their use of materials is hard to define cohesively. Some, such as Cobra and the English painters, worked with oil paint, applied in a thick impasto, working deeply into the surface. Burri used a lot of collaged hessian, while the Spanish painter Millares and Lucio Fontana cut, twisted and worked with the canvas support. Dubuffet, Fautrier, Cuixart and Tàpies all added various powdered materials to the paint or used them in lieu of paint.
A similar phenomenon occurred in America. The emphasis on materiality reached its high point with the Abstract Expressionists. Although there does not seem to have been much interest in working with incorporated or added materials in the European mode, there was a significant swing to surface and materiality in the visual arts. This trend was abetted by the advances made in commercial paint technology under the pressure of wartime demands for technologically enhanced products. Commercially available paints were more fluid than traditional oil paints and cheaper too. Specific purpose paints like those tailored to the demands of the automobile industry, were sometimes used. This was a particularly American phenomenon, as the European painters tended to work with materials closer to traditional oil paints.

The great advantage of the new paint was the fluidity and flexibility that it imparted to the handling. The painters mark diverged from the brushstroke-determined, defined and positioned-to encapsulate the whole movement and gesture of the painters' arm in making it. It became possible to see the tracery of thought in the painters' gesture. The whole body, as opposed to the muscular movement of arm and shoulder was involved in the process and the bodily gesture became visible in a manner similar to Oriental ink painting. To the dots, strokes, daubs, scumbles of the painting lexicon was added gesture, splash and dribble, suggesting the fluid bodily movement that left its trace from inception to completion. As in the Chinese painting referred to earlier by Bryson, painting as performance had become part of the European tradition. A gesture was easily modified-before it had been completed in its entirety. Automatism was seen a means of releasing the images and energy of the subconscious. Automatism believed the mark's power to be undermined by the empathy and reciprocity of the painter as they make the painting. The interaction between painter, support and materials has always
been critical and foundational. It remained so but temporality had become a factor in the relationship.

The matter paintings of Tàpies done in the mid Fifties show the influences of graffiti and an interest in non-art, like casual or accidental public mark making, which were outcomes of the process of time. These marks were the scrapes, accidents and unintentional acts that left their traces on the built environment. This phenomenon, as an historical process, reflects several post-war currents of thought. The non-cultural nature of the marks parallels the contemporary expressionist interest in child art and a tendency, in some quarters, to aim for simplicity of means, materials and intentions. Graffiti partakes of several characteristics which made it attractive to contemporary painters. It was extremely informal, if not illegal, in its execution. It was a vehicle for the urban majority, who participated little in the political process and lacked the means to express themselves, to make public their emotions and concerns. With graffiti they attacked the establishment in their heartland by defacing\(^3\) the most obvious symbol of its power -the buildings. It voiced the comments of the inarticulate. Frequently the marks were without a context and lacking any inherent structure.

Graffiti was also executed with any medium to hand without assistance from the tools of bourgeois culture. Full of frustration and anger, they scratched, gouged, painted and scribbled on the walls, from toilets to banks, as if they were the proletariat canvas.

The work of both Dubuffet and Tàpies is strongly linked to the concept of the wall. Dubuffet painted a series of walls which Tàpies most likely saw when in Paris. Much has also been made of Tàpies name (meaning wall) in Catalan. The wall analogy has been explained by his interest in Buddhism and Bodhidharma\(^4\), the Indian Zen master, famous

for contemplating the wall. Walls also are linked to Leonardo's advice to look into the mark on the wall to see the subject of a painting. Likewise city walls provide the background to many elements of city visual culture-notices, advertisements, signs and graffiti. They constitute a history as they bear the marks, deliberate and accidental, of the daily lives of the inhabitants. At a certain point after the war, these previously ignored marks came to be seen as relevant as the artefacts of the primitive were fifty years before. A contemporary Spanish critic who wrote:

In his impasto paintings Tàpies has repeatedly captured the spirit of the old Barcelona: the austerity and gloom of the city, that mysterious, forbidding air emanating from the tall rows of houses in the dark, narrow streets, which at midday are deserted, as if a curfew has been imposed for the early hours of the afternoon. These streets have an atmosphere in which elements of the past still survive; not only the beliefs and superstitions of the Middle Ages, and the power of the Inquisition, but also the spirit of revolt which has left its mark on the paving stones, the walls and gates.

The subject matter of these paintings, however, is not walls, nor even the idea of a wall (which they certainly do evoke). The initial impact of the wall paintings for both Dubuffet and Tàpies, lies in the material. We see the paintings, usually unframed in Tàpies' case, in a gallery with excellent lighting and white walls. This contextualisation only serves to emphasise the materiality of the work. Densely packed, it protrudes in front of the surface to confront the spectator with the immediacy of a daily experience without any deictic traces of a subject of representation. The isolation and the context emphasises their fragmentary nature and heightens the reference to a wall. If these
paintings are reminiscent of parts of walls, it is as a part of a wall that has been removed from its surroundings, and framed, as it were, to heighten the effect. We see the wall perhaps as a given, not as a pictorial construct. The traditional figure/ground relationship has been subverted with the ground supplanting the figure as the emotional core of the painting.

Similarly, the intercessions made by Tàpies and other artists into the ground of these dense surfaces were minimal and frequently artistically very basic, primitive even. They have resonances with inarticulate attempts to communicate but they remain on the level of the pre-verbal. They were scratched, dotted and scraped with instruments or imprinted with marks of the body, hands and feet. The materials allowed a manner of working outside of the painting tradition. The hiding, eradicative nature of oil paints was reversed as the painter could now work back into the surface or make an impression in the material. What was underneath was revealed by scraping and gouging. The imprint was concrete and irreversible, avoiding the guile of illusionistic space. Both processes were basic and more related to the everyday world of work rather than the sophistication of culture.

Marks seem to have been randomly applied and give the appearance of the seemingly chaotic marks a child (or a graffitist) might make. By suggesting an incompleteness, randomness creates a certain ambiguity which circumvents the structure of language and learning. To a large degree the ambiguity of the seemingly unplanned intercessions serves to highlight the materials and associated meanings. The intention also seems to be aimed at preventing the viewer reading the work quickly for an acknowledged or predigested meaning. Without a recognisable subject, and avoiding the language of early twentieth century painting, the onus of comprehension is put back on the viewer. The
purpose of the marks is to draw attention to the integrity of making and the work's lack of pictorial illusion. The marks serve to intimate a possible access to the interpretation of the material's impenetrability. They are ambiguously located to nullify their operation as suggestions or as maps to order meaning.

The artist's marks work on two levels the first of which is to signify both the culturally conditioned and its insignificance in relation to the gravity of matter. Conscious of the impossibility of efforts to circumvent the cultural they sought originality in nature or in oppositional terms non-culture. Tàpies exhibited a minimalist matter work where gritty sand was seemingly tossed onto the canvas and left without any further working by the artist. The gesture of tossing the sand is a minimalist cultural one. It is a gesture from the working world, one that is duplicated in various contexts by all sorts of people on a daily basis. In this way the cultural marks on the material are shown to be puny, ambiguous and insignificant imprints on the eternity of matter. The marks serve to accent the superficial and peripheral character of the cultural in relation to the essential nature. The duality of the two is inescapable but presented as potentiality. Tàpies himself has put an ontological and absolute emphasis on matter: "Matter, the atman, always stays the same, and diversity consists in form, in what is known as maya."

The significance of matter to Tàpies is quite clear. It is the atman (soul), the unswerving constant in the flux of maya (illusion). Matter is the end point; one can go no further back. It is precultural—from here everything begins. Diversity of form is a characteristic of manifestation concomitant with the contingent structures and belief of the culture and society. Culture is shown to be making a puny impingement on matter—the ground of all manifestation.
Everyday materials that were used by these post-war painters (sand, mortar) were synonymous with the rubble of the city’s destruction. They were materials that had been transformed into a cultural object and then destroyed, causing a reversion to the natural condition. Minimally processed, they partake of the culture but are separate from it. They are real, tangible things that can be touched and experienced as opposed to beliefs and ideas. Fautrier’s mortar a component of building, was associated with everyday work rather than art. This same material had once held bricks together, making grand architectural edifices possible. Unlike the manufactured discards of culture that Braque and Rauschenberg used, materials such as mortar were basic to manufacturing culture itself. A contemporary artist Anselm Keiffer, working metaphorically with the same historical period, uses many of the same materials.

The particular material that each European artist used is, in itself, no more specifically mystical nor spiritual than any other material. Its relevance in this thesis is the comparatively untouched, unaltered and unworked status of its application and use. As a signifier in their work, the material brings together meanings of the primordial, the natural, the spiritual and the commonplace. For the approach of these painters to the materials is the antithesis of scientific concept of inert matter and the raw materials industry utilised in the production of saleable commodities. Matter, as opposed to the materialism of capitalism, has been another theme than has run through much of the material emphasis in contemporary art, as is evident in the work of Joseph Beuys.

Manipulating the materials has a profound effect on all aspects of painting, however in the work of Tàpies the working is fairly minimal. Any working is carried out after the major part of the painting—the pouring onto the canvas— is completed. The materials are a very active presence in the painting. The co-operation of materials is essential to the
completion of the works. Moreover, these matter paintings took on elements of the sculptural. *In the Shape of a Chair* a work completed in 1966, is a good example.\textsuperscript{10}

Sculpture was seen as a real and tangible presence and the sculptural\textsuperscript{11} was considered more real as it occupied space, in the same way as an object, does. Space is as essential to life as air and is an essential part of nature, mythically and ontologically, unchanging and omnipresent.

The emphasis on materiality by the post war European artists was, in part, due to considering a painting as a convention which was separate to the experience of the sculptural space object. The sculptural space was real not, as in painting, a window on illusionistic space but an object-matter formed in space. In fact the arguments virtually reiterated those put forward sixty years earlier in relation to Cézanne and traditional painting. D.H. Lawrence, argued for the material independence of Cézanne’s images in a way that anticipates the sculptural:

But Cézanne's apples are a real attempt to let the apple exist in its own separate entity, without transfusing it with personal emotion. Cézanne's great effort was, as it were, to shove the apple away from him and let it live for itself. It seems a small thing to do: yet it is the first real sign that man has made for thousands of years that he is willing to admit that matter actually exists . . .

Cézanne felt in paint when he felt for the apple. Suddenly he felt the tyranny of the mind, the white, worn-out arrogance of the spirit, the mental consciousness, the enclosed ego in its sky-blue heaven self-painted. He felt the sky-blue prison. And a great conflict started inside him. He was dominated by the old mental consciousness, but he wanted terribly to escape the domination .\textsuperscript{12}
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The Constructed Surface

I make the background of my canvas with the greatest care because it is the ground that supports the rest; it is like the foundations of a house. I am always very occupied and preoccupied with material because there is as much sensibility in the technique as in the rest of the painting. I prepare my own colours. I do the pulverising . . . . I work with the material, not with ideas.

Braque

This chapter will examine the characteristics of a constructed surface and the meanings that it engenders. The papier collé of Braque and Picasso will be discussed as exemplars of the process. What are the ramifications for the surface that the manipulation of collaged material engenders? How does the addition or attachment of objects to the surface alter the process of making and the meanings associated with the materials?

Construction implies assembling, fabricating and building and all these techniques are utilised in the constructed surface. Construction also embodies a manner of working whereby large modules or elements are put together to cover large surface areas quickly.

It also involves planning and forethought together with the speculative process that accompany them. These practicalities, however, are only the external manifestations of a different way of thinking about making a painting. The real and important difference lies in the manner of working the surface. The special characteristics of the constructed surface are the outcomes of the constructive method. Here special characteristics will be
explored in relation to the process, the surface and reception of the work. It will be shown that the process also involves a manner of making which modifies the character of the surface.

The *papier collé* was an innovation by Braque in Sorgues in the summer of 1912. These *papier collé*, according to William Rubin, grew out of the Cubist cardboard sculpture that Braque first executed. With *papier collé* the surface became an interplay of references, allusions and metaphors that were not intrinsic to the materials and their use, but intrinsic to the materials as cultural utilitarian objects. *Papier collé* and collage are rather different entities. According to William Rubin: “While both terms indicate etymologically a work that involves the gluing together of elements collage does not imply—as does *papier collé*—a work governed by the classical principle of the unity of medium.”2 Now the term collage tends to be used indiscriminately to mean anything stuck on or attached to the surface and this usage has been followed in this thesis.

The collaged elements in Picasso’s and Braque’s work endowed the paintings with a capacity to question and subvert itself as an illusion and as a representation of reality.3 The collaged items vacillate incessantly between the status of objects and formal elements in an illusion. All the cultural associations of the collaged object now become an factor in the metaphor. The nature of reality can, for example, be brought into question, when the collaged objects are read both as formal elements, part of an illusionistic representation and as real objects. The notion of real objects presented qua object for the viewer came into being as these real objects themselves were emphasised at the expense of other qualities.
Braque, Georges. *Fruit Dish and Glass* 1912. Charcoal and pasted paper 62 x 44.5 cm Private Collection.

Picasso. *Still Life with Chair Caning*. 1912 Collage of oil, oilcloth and pasted paper on canvas. 27 x 35cm Musée Picasso, Paris
Constructing a surface implies a different set of meanings from working the surface in an expressive way. Working with collage materials insists on more consideration of the elements in the process and also a greater concern with the relationship between these elements. Instead of reacting with the immediate visible surface, the execution is carefully planned, with particular attention given to the disposition of the elements on the picture plane. A constructive approach allows the painter to speculate and consider possibilities and meanings prior to any actual or final placement on the surface. The duration of the painter’s intervention, minimalised in the speed of the expressive reaction, is extended. The final positioning is, also, less subject to change or modification.

It is unrealistic to expect that all painters would work the surface in a similar manner but a dichotomy of approach, broadly characterised by Ingres and Delacroix, continues within the expressive tendency of Modernism. A single source has frequently been proposed as the basis for vastly different works in which the dichotomy can be clearly observed. African sculpture, for example, was a potent source for both the Fauves and the Cubists with both groups admiring the power or presence of the sculptures. For the Fauves the power was expressive while the Cubists saw more the plastic power which was compatible with their method of constructing of the surface. Individual artists can also, within the totality of their work, reflect a dichotomous approach. As an example, the Tàpies’ work *Large Gray Painting* (1955), where the matter of the surface is incised, scraped and scratched, is vastly different to the work *Metal Door and Violin* (1959) where the surface is constructed by the addition of objects onto the surface of the metal door. There are a range of positions between the extremes of these two poles.
When Picasso added some oil cloth, which was printed to imitate chair-caning, the long tradition of oil painting was broken. This first innocuous addition led to a dramatic reappraisal of the nature of painting. The technical integrity of the medium had been sacrosanct within the oil painting tradition. The young painter spent much time mastering a technique, perfecting skills over time and honing the sensibilities linked to "touch". The whole humanistic tradition of oil painting, which valorises the painter working the medium, comes under question with the introduction of this deliberately non-skilful method. The romantic notion of the work of art as the expression of the concept of an unchanging beauty as well as an acquired technical skill, had been violently attacked. The manipulation or use of collage requires only the most elementary of manipulative skills, without requiring any training or acquired skills. For collage is a child's technique—the kindergarten child's occupation of cutting and pasting.

It must be pointed out also that the touch of the painter involved in applying paint is very different from the touch in collaging. The application of paint involves the two most common motions connected with touching—stretching out from the body and lateral movement in all directions. In painting both are always executed in relation to a surface, generally a canvas. The interaction of these two (frequently simultaneous in painting) movements with the support stresses the dynamic forces and responses of the contact. Aside from each mark representing the experience of an interaction with the world, there is the added interaction of the painter with the canvas in recording that experience and with what has already been recorded. This imbues the painted mark with a probing investigatory quality as it moves contact by contact over the surface. The meaning of these spontaneous responses is concomitant with the process itself rather
than a decided purpose.

With collage, however, touch is to a greater degree pre-determined because the shape is decided upon and interaction with the support is limited and generally executed only in the final stages of attaching. Cutting and tearing are more perfunctory, uninvolved movements, consisting of contact with the collaged material but not the support. And of course there is a finality about collage that is anything but probing and investigatory. The tactile experience involving the canvas is limited to the duration of attaching, with large areas of the work unaffected by the painter’s responsive bodily movements and experience.

Collage was also a break from the Cubist’s own short tradition, as they had, until then, shown a complete disregard for realistic surfaces. The introduction of collage, especially in a manner that was close to trompe l’oeil, introduced a natural “certitude” (as Braque wrote) which was at odds with their emphasis on the rich tactile sensuality of the surface itself. For although destroying the reality and representation of the object, Cubism strongly emphasised the tangible reality of the actual painting.

The early additions were frequently some kind of simulated surface- wallpaper imitating wood grain, for example. These first collages were in appearance close to reality and in thickness close to the picture plane and hence the impact was important but the disruption to the traditional surface was minimal. The works which first used these wallpapers were initiated by Braque and called by him papier collé. The introduction of these materials was most likely an extension of the incorporation into Cubist paintings of single letters or fragments of words, and later, materials in the form of menus, parts of
newspapers. They also have precedents in the _tromp l'oeil_ nails that Braque painted into some of his work.

Both Picasso and Braque were loath to venture into the area of abstraction. They began to introduce elements which would link the paintings firmly to the reality of the world. Their solution emphasised the reality of the painting as an object and accentuate the surface of the work. The introduction of materials other than oil paints into Cubist paintings came at a comparatively early date in the development of Cubism. The letters-either individual letters or parts of words-were originally hand painted and there was much debate about whether to paint the letters or to stick on a piece of newspaper. In these discussions Picasso and Braque, placed themselves on the side of the artisans (_peintres-décorateurs_) who painted houses with such varied simulated effects. As well as giving clues for the reconstruction of the subject these effects were also elements of reality. As such they could not undergo pictorial distortion.6

Collage also questioned the whole posture of painting as a discipline. As opposed to the historical technical discipline, artists virtually used any object-discarded items and even rubbish-to make a painting. The odd bits of material thus employed were those generally considered to have no aesthetic value-they were the mass produced products of the industrial age. They had already been used once before painters incorporated them into their work. Originally purchased in the market place, they were used and then discarded at whim as useless. Their status as rubbish thus subverted the notion of a painting that was to be valued and preserved for posterity. The humble, ordinary nature of the objects seems to have reinforced the Cubist painters’ solidarity with artisans, in opposition to the fine art tradition.
Technique and skills were acceptable, it would seem, as long as they did not spring from that tradition. Braque, whose father was a house painter, was trained in the techniques of Victorian house painting and he utilised these skills later in his career. The interesting thing about many of the housepainter’s techniques that Braque incorporated was that the paint was applied only so that it could be altered. The execution was planned with several steps and materials being used in the process, all of which had to be carefully coordinated. Even one of the most simple, like the use of household combs to alter the texture and touch of the paint, involved this planned execution. Simulated marble, tortoise shell etc. with several distinct stages and materials, were even more complex.

Before the *papier collé* was incorporated in the surface it was treated in ways that set it aside from the usual painting process. For the element to be used it had to be either cut, folded or torn. These almost childish everyday actions are mechanical, manipulative ones, more akin to gestures and they exclude any trace of a physical presence associated with the brushstroke. A *papier collé* work is never admired for the manner in which the paper has been cut or folded or torn, in the way that brushstrokes are discussed as evidence of the painter’s touch. As a mechanical action it is associated more with touch than with perception. Physicality is apparent in the paper even before it is applied to the surface. The application is also an action, mundane and physical, separate from the painterly tradition of touch related to the brushstroke.

Collage was to continue as an important part of Modernist practice. Whereas at the outset elements like paper, cardboard and wallpaper were used, objects were later incorporated and eventually canvases were shaped, becoming objects in themselves. Collage also led to the tendency to explore unusual or different technical processes and
to see aesthetic possibilities in objects and materials previously considered to be bereft of them.

Collaged additions were seen in terms of two contrasting modes. On the one hand collage was read as a revolt against photographic illusionism which was considered as the preserve of the Academy synonymous with bourgeois morality and materialism. An object from the real world was added in preference to an exact-and painted-copy. To no small degree this was because the objects were part of the real world as opposed to the fabricated abstracted world of culture. On the other hand the practice of collage reinforced the expressive tendency of Modernism that these painters wished to be aligned with. In no small measure it signified a revolt against the adept, slick brushwork associated with the technical skills of the prevailing culture.

From the beginning Cubist painters adhered to a strong basic structure which underpinned their manner of working. It would appear that they began their paintings by broadly composing the whole picture and then working into the smaller areas to balance the total composition. Picasso's process of construction of the paintings had a precursor in that, at about the same time as the execution of the *papier collé*, Picasso made a three dimensional work of a guitar using wood and cardboard. This work was formally influenced by an African mask from Grebo but the thinking and manner of making is wholly Cubist. The approach of Picasso and his fellow Cubist painters was founded in an additive or constructive manner of working rather than a subtractive or destructive mode. It was invariably made through the addition of elements-constituting assemblages, generally of everyday objects- rather than by subtraction through carving or the removal of elements.
Attaching objects is, however, an inherently different process from treating the surface in an expressive manner. It is also different from manipulating surface paint in some way after it has been applied. Any addition is effected by placing a fixed and decided shape of a certain colour, tone or texture on the surface. As such, consideration must firstly be given to placement within the format and the relationships that this engenders on the picture plane. The process is similar to the functioning of a blueprint or plan, it serves as a guide to orientate the maker in their completion of the work. It seeks to eliminate as much of the confusion and uncertainty associated with the process before it is started. It allows for possible difficulties in the process to be identified and resolved before they become a problem. It is thus a manner of making that aims at circumventing potential difficulties. This pre-making process is ordered, involving consideration and assessment, rather than instinct and reaction as is involved in producing the expressive surface.

This constructive process gives more emphasis to the element of time. Any intercession by the painter is only made after due consideration and testing, and involves careful visual assessment of the actual placement of the collaged element. If it is not suitable it is moved. Braque's pencil marks, obvious in *Fruit Dish and Glass*, were to fix the pieces in the optimum position, precisely where he wanted them to be. The process is tangible, visible and takes place over a fair time span as it includes the actual testing and then evaluation. As a consequence it permits the certainty that Braque refers to. The evaluation is made before the process of attachment is started but it also occurs in the present tense. In contrast to an expressionist approach it involved the making of the mark in the imagination prior to actualisation. Hence the expressionist mark is realised in the future, as it were.
Placing the collage piece on the picture plane means that the relationships so formed and the meanings created can immediately be seen. This is what Braque means by his comment that the papier collé gives the painter certitude. The perception by the painter is optical, therefore certain, and constant. There is always a visible element to look at and react to. The painter is always dealing with a concrete object and with visible concrete meanings. Should the object be moved it will be in response to a judgement about its present position and the relationships so engendered. As such it will be related to clearly visible elements and the established structure of the picture plane. There is no backtracking or circling as the process requires a more or less sequential step by step progress to the eventual completion of the painting. Moreover, the painting bears the imprint of the structure of the process on the surface and so will look constructed. The deliberative nature of the process thus focuses the type of surface marking in a certain area. The short “dabbed on” character of the brushstrokes in the early hermetic Cubism seems to be a precursor of this tendency.

The expressionist will work in a different manner, insofar that the mark made is only seen after the step has been decided. Before that, it exists only speculatively, within the imagination. The imagination allows for a time of freedom where things may be floated and explored without any necessity for explanation or justification. Justification manifestly belongs within the realm of culture whereas imagination is not totally controlled by culture. Psychologically and imaginatively, the expressionist painter is attempting to operate beyond the bounds of the cultural norm. As well as generally being faster, the decision making process will occur in response to less formal values and its effect will be visualised rather than actually seen. Speed of execution was prized
as an expressionist means of avoiding any acquired mark-making responses. This tends
to mean that the range of brushstrokes will be greater than in the constructionist
approach.

In discussing Braque’s first *papier collé Fruit Dish and Glass*, John Golding gives an
account of this process and its ramifications:

The three strips of wood grained paper boldly establish the basic composition of
the picture to which the object is subsequently related by overdrawing. Each
strip has a clear representational function: the two uppermost suggest wood
panelled walls behind the still life, while the lower one by the addition of a
circular knob becomes a drawer of the table on which it stands. The strips of
paper also have a pronounced aesthetic effect on the picture in that, like all
fragments of Cubist *collage*, they make one conscious of it as constructed or
‘built-up’ object or entity, which differs from most traditional drawings and
paintings. To recapitulate: the fragments of *papier collé* here can be said to exist
on three levels. They are flat coloured, pictorial shapes. They represent or
suggest certain objects in the picture by analogies of colour and texture or by
the addition of keys or clues. Thirdly, and this is the aspect of *papier collé* that
most relates it to other forms of Cubist collage, the pieces of paper exist above
all as themselves, that is to say one is always conscious of them as solid tactile
pieces of extraneous matter incorporated into the picture and emphasising its
material existence.⁹

All the other elements of the work are related to a compositional grid. The founding
decision thus predetermines all other decisions taken towards the completion of the painting. Even modification does not diminish its importance. Removal, or starting over again, is the only way to avoid the frame of reference set up by the first steps. The stage at which the *papier collé* were introduced into the work is crucial. If introduced at a later stage, they are a variable fluctuating element in the work, which can be modified, over-painted etc. in the layering process as the work moves to completion. As *a priori* statements of the painting, however, many of the decisions about the work have already been made even if they have not been completely resolved at that stage.

Braque’s first *papier collé*, “Fruit Dish and Glass”, shows that the three pieces of printed wood grain he used were cut and placed in various positions on the surface until the arrangement which most satisfied him was reached. In so doing several characteristics of a surface which is constructed were brought into play. The notion of composition as a predetermined, preliminary entity, as opposed to being integral to and concomitant with the process, comes to the fore. Composing in this way allows the meanings of each position to be evaluated along with considerations of the size and shape of the stuck on elements. The success of the process (and the meanings ) is visually evaluated after the event, in so far as the painters can see exactly what it is going to look like in the completed state. Despite the deliberative nature of *papier collé*, it did have the decided advantage of allowing the painter to work more quickly as large areas could be integrated and fixed very quickly.

Resolving the submerged or deeper structure of the painting by visually exploring numerous variations gives a result that is tangible and concrete.¹⁰ The result of the process is an image with many meanings already incipiently manifested. With the
structure in place and decided, the painter can devote energy and attention to the surface composition. For the Cubists, the dissection of the object into myriad facets was the foundation of the pictorial reality which vitalised the surface. Their analysis of the object-and the space surrounding it-modulated and controlled the whole picture surface.

Whilst the emphasis on surface may have been as great, it leans towards consideration, the conceptual and an accumulation of scrutinised meanings. Doubt had already been eliminated through the careful consideration of all the pictorial options.

Braque talks of this certainty when he wrote his aphoristic “Thoughts and reflection on Art” in 1917, four years after his first papier collé:

The painter who wished to make a circle would only draw a curve. Its appearance might satisfy him, but he would doubt it. The compass would give him certitude. The pasted papers [papiers collés] in my drawings also gave me a certitude.

*Trompe l’oeil* is due to an *anecdotal chance* which succeeds because of the simplicity of the facts.

The pasted papers, the imitation woods-and other elements of a similar kind-which I used in some of my drawings, also succeed through the simplicity of the facts; this has caused them to be confused with *trompe l’oeil*, of which they are the exact opposite. They are also simple facts, but are *created by the mind*, and are one of the justifications for a new form of space.  

The fact that they are “created by the mind” indicates another major distinguishing
factor in this method of working. As the image is decided before the process really begins, intention becomes paramount and the process risks being reduced to filling in which tends to minimalise the impact of other aspects of the painting\textsuperscript{12}. Experiences garnered in the making are located in one area of understanding only, with the contingent or secondary meanings that might arise in the making being minor ones. Dangers in the form of unseen difficulties or nuances are minimalised by the certainty, as is the possibility of a chance discovery or an unforseen, unknown meaning.

The difference in the two methods might well be characterised in terms of two different approaches to a journey. The expressionist departs, visiting places as the whim takes him in response to the experiences garnered en route. The constructionist, however, carefully plans where he will be at specific times and for how long well before leaving home, allowing for only minor variations to the itinerary.

Cubism as a movement, particularly in its early stages, emphasised the relation between the material and the surface. Colour was eschewed, as was any seductive surface interest. Paint of a thick dry consistency was applied with uniform short stubby strokes, dabbed on, generally horizontally. Each brushstroke appears to have been clearly and distinctly applied, without any attempt at blending, defining or delineating planes and forms in a manner reminiscent of the late Cezannes where the surface was unified by the brushstrokes. Multiple views of an object were represented and overlapping forms were made transparent. Mimetic principles were rejected and the object remade or reconstituted, avoiding the limitations of a perspectival fixed viewpoint. The increasingly fragmented forms meant that the object as a representation was frequently dependent on the title for meaning. Cezanne's geometry was pursued increasingly boldly
at the expense of the recognisability of the subject, which was in danger of being lost completely. By 1911 the Cubist intensity of the pursuit of plastic space meant that the differentiation between a portrait, studio subject and a landscape was minimal.  

The whole Cubist painting was predicated on a rigorous and meticulous analysis of the forms of nature which then became fragmented or a dissected into its smallest elements. Nature had been reduced to the smallest plastic fragments in a manner paralleling the scientific research into atoms that was being conducted at the time. The space surrounding the objects was similarly broken up. The density of the forms and space was mirrored in the ubiquitous surface working of the painting. The daubed surface worked to hold the forms unified and keep their relationships stable and recognisable. The pre determined structure, however, allowed the painters to negotiate the complexities of the space and the object that they were creating.

John Golding remarked on the benefits of *papier collé* to the Cubists:

Now in the *papier collés*, the composition, and the forms of object themselves, could be built up very rapidly by a few ready made elements, while in the contemporary paintings the same effect could be achieved by a few, large boldly painted planes or shapes. The process thus became that of adding together or combining compositional elements, which were subsequently made to play their part in the rendering of solid forms and the space around them. Painted objects and eventually the whole painting, even, one might say, pictorial reality itself, was ‘built-up to’ rather than dissected or taken apart.  

The ramifications of collage for the surface were immense if often overlooked. First and
foremost it drew attention to the surface. The thickness of the collaged item-as minimal
as it was-also emphasised the space in front of the surface. It permitted the introduction
of elements from the real world- and more particularly elements from the products of
industrialised society, previously considered unfit for inclusion in the arts. The
complexity of the metaphors this generated can from the outset be seen in a work like
Picasso's early Still Life with Chair Caning where there are painted elements, painted
real elements like letters, trompe l'oeil elements and real elements. The caning of a chair
-which is actually a simulation of real chair caning-is harmonised within the picture
space. The surface itself shows the same intricacy, with manifest space having a paint
texture and the simulated chair caning, which looks rough and should be rough from an
experiential viewpoint, being as smooth as the plastic surface it is printed on.


2. *Picasso & Braque Pioneering Cubism* p36

3. *Picasso and Braque Pioneering Cubism* p30 On page 38 he writes: “Finally, the cutting or shaping of paper, and perhaps even its coloring, were at the heart of Braque’s paper sculptures. One has not much more than to imagine him pinning these paper reliefs flat on a piece of drawing paper, adding his wood grained wallpaper, imitating stencilled letters, and linking the whole with a few linear accents in charcoal to grasp how it was that Braque saw his invention of papier collé in Fruit Dish and Glass as deriving wholly from his own 1911-12 work.”

4. Tapies did many works over the years which leaned towards a wholly constructed surface but the general thrust of his work was more in the area of the expressive and intuitive.

5. *Still Life with Chair-Caning* painted in 1912 and now in Musée Picasso, Paris This seemed to be one off for Picasso and he did not come back to this technique until after he saw Braque’s papier collé work.

6. This paragraph has been largely drawn from *Cubism.* p105-106

7. Braque taught some of the techniques of simulation to Picasso who with his typical inventiveness and verve used them in very different and slightly incongruous ways.

8. It is interesting to note that forty years later Tapies was to express the same sentiments.

9. *Cubism* p109

10. The structure is of course highly obvious and visible in the Cubist works. In the example of Braque’s use of papier collé, the working over the actual papier collé is fairly minimal and transparent.
11. *Art in Theory* p 209-210

12. With many works of a later generation the decision almost comprised the totality of the work as there was little or no working or modification of the image after the original placements.

13. Picasso’s painting *The Accordionist* was done in Céret in 1911. As it was inscribed Céret on the back the owner for many years thought it was a landscape.

14. This element of reductionism is also apparent in the expressive brushstroke of many of the Abstract Expressionist painters and those that were influenced by them. The Baselitz quote in the chapter *Working the Surface* is a good example of this although in this case it has an entirely different meaning.

15. *Cubism* p120

16. Done by Picasso in the winter of 1911-12. This small oval painting was owned by Picasso who believes it was his first collage.
The Unworked Surface

"I use them as I would a problem of light. I do not use them to touch them. There is a whole modern art like this, I know. They have touched the materials in order to transcend them, to intervene on the materials. I have never intervened on the materials; for me the idea of intervening on the materials is unbearable. I am interested in the presence, like a creature which is there where the light falls. I am only interested in it in that sense, not to intervene."  
Enzo Cucchi

It would seem to be logical that the exploration of the meanings available through the use of materials that they would be used without significant alteration of their substance by the painter. Several artists have indeed worked in this way, allowing the materials-in a state as close to their natural state as possible-to speak for themselves. Historically, the roots of this tendency can be seen in the work of several artists. Tàpies' first matter paintings, for example, were done about 1955, but by 1956 he had completed a painting which consisted of earth seemingly thrown on the canvas-the materials being presented qua materials, with little or no intervention by the artist. This chapter will explore the ramifications and meanings of this trend, examining it in relation to the materials themselves and also analysing the relationship of the works to their context. Materials used in this way suggest a total absence of artifice. The intervention of the human seems limited simply to gathering or selection. The absence of any working means that the
materials stand alone as both the vehicle and communicator of meaning. Any process
which might allow the intrusion of any cultural conditioning is limited to the process of
presentation itself, which in most cases is limited to the most elementary or basic
procedures. This absence of intervention, paradoxically evokes mystical connotations of
closeness to an Absolute being.

Painters had already indicated an awareness of the intrinsic values of the materials, once
raw materials began to play a major role in painting. *Papier collé* from the beginning,
selected and used materials as painterly element, integral to the painting, but the
inclusion of sections of menus and newspapers were used in a different way. Familiarity
with the materials seems to have naturally led to their presentation with minimal working
or intervention by the artist. The concern here, however, is with the logic of progression
from simple incorporation of materials to the foregrounding of the unworked nature of
the materials. All materials in painting must involve some degree of process but the
limited mediation that is involved in mere presentation produces a wide variety of
meanings. Presentation necessitate the materials being in the most ordinary or natural
state implying they are in a state of being “in nature” untouched by the artist. The first
impression of such a work is that it is totally lacking artifice. With only minor
differentiation, the materials are exactly as one would find them in the real world.

The 1957 Yves Klein exhibition at the Galerie Colette Allendy consisted of low trays set
on the floor filled with dry pigment-ultramarine in powdered form. Nothing at all had
been done to these materials by Klein—they were presented as they would have been
found in a colourmaker’s shop. Klein had not interceded in the everyday state of the pigments. They were simply presented, exhibited without comment, as it were. The works developed from an earlier exhibition where the canvases had been painted all over with the same blue. The colour was applied leaving the barest texture on the surface and continued around the side of the stretcher. To achieve the greatest anonymity of surface the paint was sponged on leaving only the merest trace of the method of application. In a subsequent development, Klein attached the sponges he had used to the surface of the works. The impersonal or anonymous quality of the paintings was intensified by the presentation of a series of works all exactly the same size and using the same colour. The manner of presentation was more akin to a wordless pointing to-as if to avoid any suggestion of subjective comment.

In presenting the materials in their natural state, artists like Klein were isolating them from their usual function and their accepted condition within the culture. Their isolation in this way in a gallery allowed them to be seen and their intrinsic meanings thus to be revealed. In this way the works were an attempt to function outside the tradition and history of painting itself. Many works had previously questioned this tradition and tried to subvert or undermine it, but these works consciously attempted to place themselves outside the tradition. None of the signifiers of painting practice were visible in Klein’s completed work.

Of these monochrome works by Klein, Barbara Rose noted that:

The absence of imagery in Yves Klein’s monochrome ‘blue’ paintings, the
ultimate informel works, identifies content not with imagery or pictorial structures, but with technique and materials. In identifying image and content with materials, informel styles coincided with the objective literalist direction of American painting after Abstract Expressionism. But once these automatic processes were divorced from their image creating function, in styles that disavowed drawing as a remnant of the dead European past to be purged, the absence of imagery threw the entire burden of pictorial expression on the intrinsic properties of materials. The result was an imageless, abstract painting as fundamentally materialist orientated as the literal “object art” it purported to oppose.³

Kleins comments on and explanation of his work tended to vary and change shape as time went by. It would seem, however, that apart from the fascination with blue, the works were largely a reaction to the tachisme that was rampant in Europe at the time. Although the Klein works were executed partly in opposition to the prevailing tachist aesthetic, there was a general trend at the time to move towards monochrome works. Similarly, with his matter paintings, Tàpies all but eliminated colour. Monochrome paintings were common both in Europe and America, frequently in relation to the depiction of elements of spirituality. Not only Tàpies, but Rothko, Newman and others, explored the effects of the almost complete elimination of colour.⁴ The as is pigment of Klein and others was an attempt to take the ontological step into a territory where all that exists is the materials.
The combination of materials, monochrome and unworked presentation placed the meaning largely in the realm of the materials. An image in the conventional sense was not made at all, nor were conventional elements of an image visible at all in the work. The work of sifting and presenting is invisible in the final work (as in the case of Wolfgang Laib). Similarly the daily replenishment and maintenance that is part of the process is also unseen by the viewer.

All tonal, textural and colour variations were suppressed and the work emerged as anonymous as a painted kitchen wall. Devoid of visual references and allusions, such a work does not exhibit the passage of time in the visible end product in any way. Because it aims to suppress any evocation of visual reality, it is not a work at all in the traditional sense. The question immediately posed is to how to approach it and make sense of its materials. Although they are recognisable materials-pre objects, as it were-they do not have the associations of recognisable objects. Their presentation is deliberately anonymous. They are usually evenly spread, carefully, unvaryingly distributed or casually piled in predictable heaps. In many cases the material is almost a non-material, being in everyday life known but close to invisible.

When a powdered pigment or similar material is used, it renders all contours and values soft and nebulous. The surface is thus extremely vulnerable, changeable and indefinite with labile contours. Anish Kapoor is quoted as saying: “with the early powder pieces, one of the things I was trying to do was arrive at something which was as if unmade, as if self-manifest, as if here by its own volition”5.

Wolfgang Laib’s work is another example in which the unlikely and ephemeral materials of pollen, essential for the fertilisation of plants, and wax and honey are used. The latter are products of the bee which is crucial for the continuation of the natural cycle. The pollen, for example, is laboriously collected by the painter at precisely the right time which is decided by natural phenomena like the seasons and climatic conditions. Once collected, it is stored and later sieved onto a receptive flat surface.

The invisibility of such materials is an interesting question to consider. Pollen, for example, is virtually invisible in the real world. An environmental fact, its essential role in the pollination of crops is well known. But even for those living in a rural environment it is still largely invisible, possibly only seen at close quarters or at specific times and places.

Speaking of Laib’s process of pollen collection, Hans-Joachim Müller notes:

Only he collects, only he sprinkles. These are tasks he never delegates. They are his tasks. “His” means: a bodily self experiences itself in time, experiences itself in a context which it does not want to have at its command, in which it fits in. Fits in by waiting and being there in time. And in doing so, it does not usurp the things which it encounters. Collecting and sprinkling are gentle, careful forms of appearance which require neither a plan nor a strategy. Nothing is created, produced, processed, exploited, utilised. No transformation of energy takes place -only bodily involvement.6
Nothing could be further from the instant gratification which lies at the core of modern technological society. Time and the lived experience are essential to the making of the work—as they should equally be in the reception. Pollen collection, by its very nature, must be carried out in conjunction with the fluctuations of the seasons and climate. It involves knowledge of precisely when certain species are to drop their pollen in specific locations. Such knowledge cannot be gained from books or through information technology. Intangibles like rainfall, temperature, winds and even the previous season influence the conjunction that makes the pollen possible. The collectors are entirely at the dictates of nature. They must be ready to collect whenever all the natural necessary conditions of season, climate, locality and plants concur.

The collector, moreover, must have a very precise local knowledge coupled with a sensitivity towards the micro-climatic and weather. Collection involves movement through time and space. The artist’s work which results in the process of spreading or pouring requires the preparatory process of collection over the seasons and across the expanse of the landscape. The collection is not physically arduous but neither is it mentally demanding. It does, however, involve a recognition and acceptance of a universal cycle outside the artist’s control. Patience and submission to the environment and the virtue of the work characterise the work—which is largely effortless and not intellectual—but intense in its submissive determination.

Submission is inherent in the very nature of such work. The struggle with materials that Tàpies refers to is not only absent but would be totally out of place here. The painter has
Laib, Wolfgang. *Pollen from Hazelnut*. 1986, 320 x 360 cm
Installation Capc. Musée d’art contemporain, Bordeaux

*Pollen from Hazelnut, brick, stucco*
46 x 92 x 280 cm Installation Hortus Artis, Orto Botanico, Turin
to submit to the work from the beginning of its making to the end. After arriving at an intention to make, much time must be spent waiting for the right time to collect the pollen. The process cannot be hurried nor can the amount available be humanly influenced. If the weather turns inclement, a large part of a year’s collecting might become unavailable, in which case Laib must wait for the next year to start again. This time consuming task and the laboriously slow sifting onto the surface are both aspects of the artist’s submission for the good of the work.

It must be noted that the tendency to lose the image is not only evident in works that placed great emphasis on materiality of the surface. Rothko, Newman and many others produced works that were similarly almost devoid of an image. The otherworldly quality of these paintings linked them firmly with notions of the contemplative and the unknown. The conflation of materials, monochrome and an imageless image are elements in a tendency towards what J.E. Cirlot called the *Imago Ignota*. As he noted, this tendency had extensive historical antecedents and could be described only in terms of negatives and paradoxes:

It is this type of unfamiliar pattern that constitutes the ‘unknown image’-a pattern of words, shapes or colours that has no correspondence with the normal, either in the world of exterior reality or in that of the normal, human feelings. These ‘unknown images’ create their own kind of reality and express the spiritual need of particular individuals to live within this created reality. They symbolise, in sum, the unknown, the antecedents and the aftermath of man, or that which
surrounds him and which his senses and his intelligence are incapable of
apprehending or of appropriating. The scope of the unknown is immense, for it
encompasses the Supreme Mystery or the Mystery of mysteries (the secrets of
the cosmos and of creation and the nature of Being) and also the psychological -
and, indeed, existential-mystery of the 'unexplored'.

Separation from normal worldly discourse posits the work in an area inaccessible to
language and the modes of understanding associated with it. Not having a
"correspondence with the normal, either in the world of exterior reality .. or human
feelings" implies that it is extrinsic to the normal manner of understanding. The work
acts to set up a conundrum. The material is obvious and familiar and hence known,
however it is so far removed from how we know it and the normal situation in which we
know it that it is virtually unknown. (In reality any explanation is unnecessary because it
is prompted by a desire for information as opposed to knowledge.) The normal manner
of comprehension comes to a standstill in dealing simultaneously with the polarities of
this dichotomy. To remain in this uncertainty (that is, not categorising or deciding) to
avoid conviction, allows contact with the materiality of the work itself:

Within this cessation of the normal process of understanding, an alternative mechanism
is canvassed. The work, being there before us, is the sole means for realising the
alternative process. This process has been referred to previously. It elicits a different
mode of understanding that is similar to that described by Schwaller de Lubcz in relation
to symbols. He wrote:
The image, the form is there concretely before us and it can expand, evoking within the prepared viewer a whole complex of abstract, intuitive notions or states of being-qualities and relationships which cannot be described but only experienced.⁸

Art can encourage the realisation that there are areas of the mind where free imagination can be allowed full play. Here there is no need for explanations of any kind and many things can be intimated without consequences. It is interesting to note in this context that both Laib and Kapoor are significantly influenced by Indian thought.

As noted, the presentation of materials frequently involve more of a “pointing to” rather than a comment-implied or otherwise. This is a conscious strategy to encourage the creation of the space for an alternative mode of understanding (although it could be argued that all paintings are presented without comment) but the difference in intention and reception is really very important. As an example, if standing at a doorway one is told that the chair is in front of the window, one’s attention is directed essentially to the chair and peripherally to the whole scene, particularly that adjacent to the window. Any response is more than likely to centre on the chair or some aspect of it in relation to the window. If on the other hand the chair is merely pointed to, the possibilities for association are wider and far more comprehensive. The response might be towards the size, colour, age as well as any other visible aspect of the chair. There is no contextualisation and hence no limiting of possible references in relation to the chair. The notion of a chair thus shrinks from a position of dominance to being one possibility
There might be, for example, an association that springs from the texture or colour of the covering materials, leading into vastly disparate areas that are not directly related to the idea of the chair and its situation at all. As opposed to the more linear suggestion of language, correspondences and associations are open ended and, more importantly, infinite in time and context. A colour correspondence does not end there but continues to associate in the most unintentional or haphazard way. The correspondences and associations are undirected, derived in an uncontrolled, intuitive manner. Unpredictable and unconventional, they are exposed to the whole gamut of human thought and feelings, avoiding the controlling influences of education and culture. Even though the process is eventually interrupted, it can be sparked again in the future to act retrospectively. Standing aside from the normal to some degree, puts it outside the limitation of time as associations can be made with previous experiences or events. The process is individual and experiential as it is rooted in the previous lived experience of each viewer and their experience of the work itself.

Works like Laib’s have inescapable connotations of and connections with nature. The connotations are more than frequently couched in non mental levels of language. Another contemporary artist whose work involves the use of natural materials is the English sculptor Anish Kapoor. With Kapoor the powdered colours are piled in geometric shapes as opposed to being simply spread. In talking of Kapoor’s work, Jeremy Lewison wrote:
There can be no doubt but that his assertion (that the creative part of his being is feminine) must be interpreted in the light of the Jungian anima, the unconscious female characteristics within man. In The Great Mother Eric Neumann, one of Jung’s most faithful disciples, examines female archetypes as represented in art, particularly primitive art, and equates anima or the ‘transformative character’, with creativity. The Great Mother, frequently symbolised by the vessel, ‘is parthenogenetic and requires the man only as opener, plougher and spreader of seed that originates in the female earth’. ‘The female is the source of all creation in her various guises as vessel, mountain, mother and ultimately world. ‘ Kapoor’s belief in the feminine nature of his creativity, therefore, is informed by the psychoanalytic notion of woman as Creator and this finds expression in the drawings themselves.9

In this statement we find the same notions that were current at the time of the German Expressionists being revived in different terminology. The “unconscious female characteristics within man” is a strong visual image of the notion of the other that is such a powerful force of opposition to culture and society. It is equated with creativity and the female as the source of all creation with only seminal, but minor, input from man. Here the typical assimilation of the female to nature is extended to posit a nature that is the cause of all effects. This is the nature that Dante referred to when he wrote that anyone who cannot become the figure cannot paint the figure. The notion has resonances with the earlier quotation made by Arthur Waley concerning the working process of the Chinese artisan.
Summing up Laib’s work Tilman Osterworld wrote:

We know the establishment of contact between man and nature over utility functions or contemplative interests. Materialistic or mental levels often have the effect of separating one from the other without necessarily having to lose their relationship with each other. Collecting pollen: Man feels himself in his natural and spiritual functions; he harvests a material substance from direct, manual touching which comes from an inner composure. Contemplation and utility no longer have a separating effect: The individual illustrates this touching-sometime, somewhere, without a purposeful or utility function- in its clearest possible form so that the essence of the pollen as well as the nature of the human individual can be expressed. The natural substance with the formal concretisation serves as living, spiritual essence, and the artistic authorisation of this touching translates individual behaviour into the universality of the natural.¹⁰

This statement refers to what can be considered the end point of the trajectory that began with the Impressionist emphasis on the brushstroke. The materials are presented as materials, materiality belongs to the materials, the process is all but invisible in the work and there are resonances of purity, spiritual essences and the “universality of the natural”. The whole tenor of the comment draws attention to values that are antithetical to those of contemporary technological society. The invisibility of the process, except as a known (if recalled) fact, separates the work from the technological emphasis on activity and even cause and effect, for the effect of the work is to seem as if there were
no cause just the material as it is in nature.

The evolution of the use of materials in Modernism as outlined shows an underlying set of assumptions that have remained fairly constant, as the surface became more agitated and expressive. The tradition of painting built up over the four hundred years since the Rennaissance had been whittled away until only the materials remained. The separation between art and reality had become paper thin and their presentation focussed on their naturalness and connection with nature. Otto Runge and Casper David Freidrich had gone to the wild extremes of the natural environment to find the sublime. In the twentieth century attention has turned to overlooked ubiquitous natural substances which “serve as a living, spiritual essence”.

1. *Entrails, Heads & Tails*. The book is a series of interviews and the pages are unnumbered

2. *Painting and Earth*. Mixed media on Canvas. 33.5 x 67.5. Private Collection Barcelona.


4. Newman's zip paintings are almost monochromatic. Tapies painting *The Great Door* 1969, 270 x198 cm is another example.

5. *Anish Kapoor*  German Colonnade pxii


9. *Anish Kapoor*

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