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CRITICAL JOURNAL

Postgraduate Diploma in Fine Art
Central St. Martins / Byam Shaw School of Art
2011

EXCERPT (essay 3 of 4)

Essay 1. **A visit**

Essay 2. **The structurees**

Essay 3. Materiality ('Furry mushroom')

Essay 4. **The translators**

“What have you learnt about your relationship with things and materials?”

3. Materiality

When you walk into the first room, you find the mushroom there, a couple of metres from the door. It's around a metre and a half high and it's covered in grey fake fur. According to the Pino Pascali exhibition notes, it's called Contropelo (Fur). 1968. Acrylic on wood structure. Nowhere does it say it is a mushroom. Nowhere does it say you can't touch it. Nowhere does it say if you touch it after your lunch, you'll fall into a deep siesta.

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It's 2:45 on a Sunday. Camden Arts Centre, London. A big group of people in the conference room listen to Phyllida Barlow and Eric Bainbridge talk about Pino Pascali, Arte Povera, British Sculpture and sculpture materials. Across the floor, on the first exhibition room, I'm standing next to what looks like a giant furry mushroom. No one is around, not even the invigilators, so I stroke the mushroom.

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The fake fur that covers the mushroom wakes up. In its 53 years of life, it's the first time it sees a Spanish art student having a nap at its feet. Many furry thoughts come to its mind, but it would be difficult to translate them into human language. To make matters worse, the concrete floor, the paint on the wall and the wood that constitutes the mushroom's structure have woken up too, so in the ensuing cacophony of material thoughts it would be impossible to isolate what the fur is thinking.

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The Spanish art student is dreaming. It's a very sensible, unspectacular dream: he's reading a book. The title is *Materiality* and it's a compilation of essays by anthropologists. The overall message is that the things we make, make us. The authors go against the traditional division between subjects and objects, instead looking at the continuum called 'material culture'.

As Hegel pointed out in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), we cannot know who we are, or become what we are, except by looking in a material mirror, which is the historical world created by those who lived before us. This world confronts us as material culture and continues to evolve through us.

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The fake fur looks intently at the art student. What a strange surface he has. The hair, that's ok. Furry enough. But what about that pale, smooth lining on his face and hands? Is it symbolic of something? Is it just burnt acrylic fur that has melted, gone smooth and decoloured, in a double metaphor of purifying fire and fading time?

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The art student keeps dreaming of reading. "Pierre Bourdieu, in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972), showed how the ability of objects to implicitly condition human actors becomes the primary means by which people are socialized as social beings." The relationships between everyday things create a material culture that teaches us about other homologous social orders. What we learn about the objects we encounter can be applied to everything else in a society. So when we look at the material stuff that exists in a society, we're somehow learning about its social order.

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Some voices arrive from the conference room. They are talking about the 'F word': fake. Pino Pascali and Eric Bainbridge are both known for their use of fake fur. The presenter of the talk, Jeffrey Dennis, mentions that Pascali made many so-called 'fakes' (fake weapons, fake shark fins) and Bainbridge has used laminate surface and fake wood grain.

Bainbridge is asked about what led him to use those materials. He replies that, for him, the fur fabric is an 'authentic' material, something from everyday life and actually more authentic than, for example, bronze, the traditional sculptors' material used to take casts from other materials.

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The art student wakes up. It's hard to have a siesta on a concrete floor. He looks at the mushroom. If he had to make something like this, how would he go about it? Wooden or metal structure first, then a chicken wire armature, then expandable foam on top, sanded to shape, then fur on top of that? Where do they sell this kind of fur? How much a metre? How many metres would it need? He inadvertently strokes the fur while mulling over the procedure and falls sleep again.

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The pine struts from the mushroom's structure were sitting around in Pascali's studio in Rome at least one year before the mushroom was made. When the art critic Carla Lonzi came in to talk to Pascali, they were there, propped up in a corner. They can recall what Pascali said:

"Sometimes when I talk I end up saying things that I had not thought of ever before. With work it's the same: one decides to make something purely with the means at

one's disposal, and you end up with different possibilities which were already germinating in the original idea. I like using the material as a starting point, it imposes its own limitations.”

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The fake fur is looking at the art student. He's breathing deeply, slowly. It's a relaxing sight. The fur hasn't slept enough lately. There isn't much it can do: it falls asleep too and starts dreaming.

In its dream, it's having a conversation with the art student. But they are using some kind of material language. The student pats the base of the mushroom. “Pat, pat.” The fur rubs itself against the student's hair: “brsh, brsh.” They consider the light reflected by each other's surface. They try to guess each other's weight. They calculate the amount of air circulating between them, and between them and the walls.

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The art student wakes up. The mushroom looks inanimate enough, but a question pops into his mind: ‘What have you learnt about your relationship with things and materials?’

His human language answer, if he were awake enough to put it together, would come: Human beings are clusters of materials - materials that happened to get a bit more complex than others, more sophisticated, and took a leap towards self-awareness, symbolic thinking, metalanguage and essay-writing. We are materials that can think themselves and deliberately transform other materials.

Artists are in a privileged position to acknowledge some of that and, rather than use materials, collaborate with them. There is a subtler way of making art that stems from this. As art viewers, we can create non-linguistic bridges with objects and savour their materiality (size, weight, temperature, movement, light, gravity, tension, elasticity, softness, graininess) before the cloying barrage of interpretation kicks in.

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