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Chapter 1
Material Imagination: Art in Europe, 1946–72

Natalie Adamson and Steven Harris

Sometime in 1947–48, the Danish painter Asger Jorn and the Belgian poet Christian Dotremont produced together – one hand passing over the other, painting and writing intermingled – a series of *peintures-mots*. In one of these early collaborative artworks (*plate 1*), four figures, their outlines filled with swirling stripes and patches of bright colour, confront each other; their open mouths indicate a voluble discussion. Scrolled across top and bottom in rather neat cursive script runs the work's title, an oracle-like injunction that is the topic, no doubt, of the depicted debate: 'There are more things in the earth of a picture than in the heaven of aesthetic theory.'[1] Riffing on Hamlet's speech on the unknowability of the world by humankind, Jorn and Dotremont provided the newly formed Cobra group with a call-to-arms when the work was shown in the exhibition *Les Fins et les moyens* in March 1949: to venture unafraid into the material world, be it paint, mud, or crude language; to be open to the forms that inhabit matter's secret interior; and to materialize the images and ideas of the imagination in artistic practice, to take theory and make it concrete. 'Nous voilà, entrés dans le domaine de la matière' ['Here we are, come into the domain of matter'], announced Pol Bury in the second issue of the group's eponymous journal, in a warning to painting not to abandon its material means for alienated ends.[2] Bury's statement was confirmed by Cobra's second exhibition in August 1949, *L'Objet à travers les âges*, where quotidian things such as telephones and potatoes were exhibited.

The intent of the essays presented here under the title *Material Imagination: Art in Europe, 1946–72* is to look more closely at some of the concrete forms of artistic experiment that took matter, materiality and materialism as their chief concern; to see how these related, but not interchangeable, concepts – as well as materials, to be sure – were conceived of, utilized by, and mobilized in artistic practice; and to show how such material forms implicitly carried within themselves – within their materials and their making – critical and imaginative thinking, making propositions visible and inciting interpretation. This intent involves a particular attention to the material conditions of an object and/or a practice. As readers will see, such attention is not simply positivist or empirical, but is historical and theoretical as well, and is so from diverse perspectives. We did not wish to impose a single theoretical or methodological approach on the contributors to this issue, but we did want them to attend to the implications inherent in the individual constellations of history, theory and practice found in their topics. An object or a practice will always differ to some degree from the interpretive frameworks imposed upon it. The resistance of material objects and practices, their refractoriness

Detail from Jean Fautrier, *Dépouille*, 1945 (*plate 3*).

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to the concepts of critics and historians, should be welcomed as an important sign of difference, and as a measure of our relation to the natural, social and cultural world in which we are imbricated as thinking, sentient beings.

Putting things like this does not imply that there is any natural relation to the world that is not also cultural. It does suggest that an engagement with the real involves both thought and experience if it is to be more than simply a logical operation. A work of art may in fact be a logical operation, and has been so historically, in certain developments within conceptual art as well as in some forms of geometric abstraction; Joseph Kosuth's analytic statements are examples that come easily to mind, as do Max Bill's Moebius strips realized in stone and metal (*plate* 2).[3] Even here, though, at an extreme limit, where practice is to a large extent determined by concept, there is always a remainder that escapes determination by an author or an artist. Its material dimension is seldom reducible to the intentions of its author; and it is received by others as they see fit.

From the celebratory and organic materialism of the Cobra artists and poets, detailed in Karen Kurczynski's essay, to the ironic critique of consumer-product detritus studied in Jill Carrick's essay on the Fluxus–Nouveau-Réaliste artist Daniel Spoerri, the exploration of materiality and meaning provides our topical framework. Several essays discuss artists who focus on a particular medium – for example, the abstract-painting practice of French artist Pierre Soulages, in the first essay by Natalie Adamson – while others examine artists who did not restrict their artistic

1 Christian Dotremont and Asger Jorn, *Il y a plus de choses dans la terre d'un tableau que dans le ciel de la théorie esthétique*, 1947–48. Oil on hessian, 100 × 129.5 cm. Liège: Collection Ernest van Zuylen. Dotremont: © SABAM, Belgium and DACS, London. Jorn: © Donation Jorn, Silkeborg and DACS, London. Photo: Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.

2 Max Bill, *Unendliche Schleife (Endless Loop)*, version IV, 1960–61. Granite, 1.3 m (height) × 1.75 m (width) × 0.9 m (depth). Paris: Centre Pompidou – Musée national d'art moderne – Centre de création industrielle. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London. Photo: © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Jacqueline Hyde.

investigations to a single medium or to the (once) conventional categories of fine art. Matter is sometimes 'visible, weighty' (to apply the description of Henri Focillon)[4] or feather-light, but filled with ever-expanding significance, as Sarah James shows in her discussion of the 'talking papers' of East German artist Carlfriedrich Claus. Paradoxically, matter is sometimes subsumed in works where the artist's life and body have become the vehicle of artistic investigation, for instance in the case study of Polish painter Roman Opałka by Alistair Rider, or where there is no object as such, as in the performances undertaken by French Fluxus artist Ben, which are examined here by Anna Dezeuze. Further contrasts are drawn between the ostensibly unbidden or decorative surfaces of an everyday urban existence that inspired artistic intervention in Alex Kitnick's essay on Eduardo Paolozzi's interior design projects, and the gleaming and gargantuan architectures of state-sponsored exhibitions examined in Marin Sullivan's reading of the ceramic, metal and neon displays at the International Exhibition of Labour in Turin in 1961.

Each of the case studies presented here combines text, artwork and interpretation to demonstrate an attention to the contradictory but binding relations between the imagination and material by artists working in Europe after 1945. The essays collectively suggest that materiality be considered as the transformative nexus between concept and form that results in the making of meaning.

Time and Place

Starting with the essays by Adamson and Kurczynski on the situation for abstract painting in Paris in 1947–48, and the intersubjective practice of the Cobra artists, respectively, the 'laboratory' of Europe is the chosen geographical region for our investigations, during the thirty-odd years between the end of the Second World War and the early 1970s. Emerging from the catastrophe of war into an uncertain postwar situation, and following a difficult few years of reconstruction and rehabilitation, the nations of Western Europe experienced growing economic and consumer prosperity over the course of the 1950s as they worked towards political reformation and unification. For its part, Eastern Europe experienced its own modes of reconstruction and unification under the aegis of the Soviet Union, until the end of 'actually-existing socialism' in 1989. Artists in socialist countries experienced different conditions from their counterparts on the other side of the Cold War frontier, including a much more explicit direction of culture by the state, and the persecution of those it regarded as anti-social elements; the East German artist Carlfriedrich Claus, of those artists discussed in this issue, suffered more from this than did the Polish artist Roman Opałka, and the treatment of art and artists was not uniform in every state or in all periods. While alert to the political, cultural, and economic differences between different European states in the postwar period (and indeed, today) as Europe itself underwent major reconfigurations, it seemed imperative to consider Europe as a whole, if only as a refusal of the categories of the Cold War divide that have obscured the actual relations there were between 'east' and 'west'.

The choice of commencement and cut-off dates raises the question of periodization, where the Second World War provides an obvious rupturing event, and the crisis of 1968 prompts a prolonged conclusion to the 'postwar' period.[5] The historian Tony Judt has described 1953–71 as the years of 'prosperity and its discontents', followed by the 'recessional' period of 1971–89.[6] The endpoint signals an increasing awareness, after the decline of the revolutionary moment of 1968 in both Eastern and Western Europe (Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Poland, as well as France, Italy and West Germany), that imminent radical social and political change was unlikely to occur, though this was not something that was understood all at once. Something decisive changed after 1968, although it took some time to register in art as well as in political consciousness. The dissolution of the Internationale situationniste in 1972 (although it happened more for reasons specific to the internal organization of the movement than because of any recognition on its part that the revolutionary moment had passed) is here taken for the end of a period when artistic experiment could be imagined to be in league with radical political change.

All such dates are, of course, somewhat arbitrary. As a number of the essays demonstrate, there are evident continuities and connections with the artistic, social and political structures in place during earlier decades. Artists like Asger Jorn, Pierre Soulages, Carlfriedrich Claus, Daniel Spoerri, Eduardo Paolozzi, Ben and Roman Opałka all built upon their knowledge, as limited as it sometimes was, of the materials, practices and ideals of art belonging to earlier decades of the twentieth century. In Sarah James' essay, we see how Claus refers back to Dada and surrealist practices such as sound poetry and automatic writing, and Natalie Adamson demonstrates the degree to which abstract painting in 1947–48 seems split between the geometric or gestural options that had been established well before 1939. An understanding of practices and processes specific to abstraction,

Dada or surrealism informed these artists' own approaches, although in each case it was a question of developing something experimentally that had its origins earlier in the twentieth century, rather than of simply repeating it. These artists developed a practice with reference to the radical artistic legacy of the past, in the quite different social, cultural and political conditions of the postwar period. For Jorn, there was a desire for revolutionary political and cultural transformation out of the ashes of the recent conflict, while for Spoerri there was recourse to the avant-garde strategy of the readymade, in response to the advent of consumer society in Western Europe in the late 1950s. Given the diversity of their points of departure and the nature of their aspirations, the complex temporality of the artworks problematizes their reductive categorization as modernist, avant-garde or neo-avant-garde.[7] In their analysis of such reimaginings and reworkings of past practices, the essays challenge the still-dominant model of art-historical interpretation that sees all such postwar work as reiterative, belated and bereft of critical power.

The fluid and politically fraught years of reconstruction saw an intensive, critical and creative questioning of the modernist paradigm that had been such a prominent part of European art in the interwar period, and that continued to dominate American art for a couple of decades to come. However, the importance of a tabula rasa desire to do away with the past must not be underestimated either. One dominant postwar direction in art and architecture practice referred to rationalist models in design and in *art concret*, with their subsequent development in kinetic art. Asger Jorn's enemy Max Bill was one of the leading proponents of a fully rational approach to art and design as a progressive alternative to the fascist past (see *plate* 2). A rationalist abstract art would not work through that past as Joseph Beuys did in his *Auschwitz Demonstration* (1956–64), but would proceed on a wholly other basis that did not explicitly engage with the past, but that began anew on the basis of reason – on the development of 'good form' in design, and on mathematics in art.[8] Bill was one of many artists and designers in the postwar era who took this rationalist and internationalist view, which focused on the present and the future rather than on the past.[9]

Still other artists and critics proclaimed a new beginning in *art concret*'s opposite number, *art informel*. While *art concret* continued a modernist art-and-design practice without explicit reference to the recent trauma of the Second World War, *informel* artists (or their critic champions, such as Michel Tapié) claimed to be making an art without reference to the formal concerns of modernism, in an intense focus on materials and process, and existentialist individualism.[10] For the Polish artist Tadeusz Kantor, in his essay 'Abstraction Is Dead – Long Live Abstraction' (1957), *art informel* permitted painting to become 'an instance of creation' with neither antecedent nor legacy.[11] The *art informel* paradigm spread quickly during the 1950s throughout Europe, including Spain, Italy, the Bundesrepublik Deutschland (West Germany), Poland and Yugoslavia, among other countries.[12] By 1960, when French painter Jean Fautrier received the Grand Prix at the Venice Biennale, the *informel* had become the paradigmatic pan-European artistic style in painting.

In contrast to the seductive appeal of an art without memory, it was the Italian art historian Giulio Carlo Argan's view that the material surface of an *informel* painting accumulates and accrues possible meaning as it grows in density. In his striking analysis of Fautrier's work, illustrated with extreme close-up details of the paintings, Argan follows Henri Bergson's belief that the past is deposited in the present in the form of memories: hence the necessity of understanding 'that the past should be *acted*

by matter, *imagined* by mind'.[13] Here the accretion of layers of thickened and coloured paste on a support to constitute a painting – of a decaying body, a still-life, or painting itself – seems to require the viewer to become both archaeologist and story-teller (*plate* 3). For Argan, Fautrier's literal incorporation of time-consciousness into the artwork's layers of material substance distinguishes his work as *European*, for it is unable to banish or completely bury the memory of the recent past of war and the reckoning that is yet to come:

> for him [Fautrier] history is concrete duration, time effectively lived, calling for admission on the threshold of the present and of the action to receive from that act a meaning that might be absolution or damnation. It is factual reality, identified to matter, to the things. … And he accepts, ready to endure it to the bitter end, the confused darkness of the real: the rarefied, diaphanous, inconsistent flutter of utopia holds no hope for him.[14]

European art is seen by Argan as that which has become a critical and interrogative reflection in material form on both art making and on human existence itself, as they are historically situated.[15]

The two and a half decades between 1946 and 1972 provides a time span, or chronotope, long enough to grasp the tense relations between past and present, and between rupture and continuity, that characterize these years: a highly unstable situation that is paradoxically both 'postwar' and the beginning of new territorial and ideological warfare and of decolonization.[16] Beginnings collide with ends in this new political world in embryo, as the reconstruction and consolidation of Europe coincided with the end of its ascendancy, and the US and USSR emerged as world powers.[17] The ever-now, future-oriented time-scale of modernity folds back upon itself as artworks, people, economies, nation-state identities and Europe itself, as a supra-national region, all grapple with the consequences of the past to such a degree that this extended period of time – for all of its apparent achievements – might be best described as a 'crisis'.[18]

However, this postwar timeframe also encompasses a period when social and cultural change outside the dominant system of market capitalism could still be imagined by artists, thinkers and ordinary people on either side of the Cold War frontier – as, for instance, Sarah James shows us in her essay on Carlfriedrich Claus, or as was the case for Jorn and his Cobra and situationist colleagues. Claus spent much of his career in the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR) before the unification of Germany in 1990, but he established and maintained relationships with likeminded artists, writers and intellectuals in other parts of Europe, and was committed to Marxism as a project of emancipation despite his lengthy harassment by the socialist regime in Berlin. Such change could potentially occur through political transformation, as the moment of 1968 suggested, or through a countercultural framework. For these artists, the possibility of an experimental artistic practice, still largely though not exclusively focused on the production of art objects, was predicated on the idea that the work was contributing to larger shifts in a constantly changing cultural and political landscape, rather than one in which the game was set and the rules firmly in place.

For others, however, as we see in the majority of our case studies, artists worked within the parameters of the art systems and the broader cultures in play. Soulages and Opałka develop their artistic practices within self-defined limits, which imply a refusal to make demands or consider issues or values outside of the boundaries of an existential practice. Some of the Nouveau-Réaliste artists were preoccupied

3 Jean Fautrier, *Dépouille*, 1945. Mixed media on paper mounted on linen, 96 × 146 cm. Los Angeles: The Panza Collection, MOCA. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London. Photo: MOCA

with the large amount of waste that the new consumer society was generating; the number of spectacles on display in Spoerri's *L'Optique moderne* (1961–63) points to that society as a given substrate of his investigations. Paolozzi and Nigel Henderson were embroiled in similar considerations when they invented wallpaper designs based on graffiti, in relation to the signs of popular culture found around Henderson's home in Bethnal Green; it nearly goes without saying that the visitors who attended the International Exhibition of Labour in Turin in 1961, and lingered before the ceramic mural designed by Fausto Melotti, were participating in one of the major spectacles produced for their delectation by industry and government. Ben is a liminal case of an artist for whom art is a mode of living, or vice versa, a perspective which recognizes that art, and life, might be changing now beyond recognition, obviating the need for a new French revolution, though his work also partakes in the countercultural notion that the radical social and cultural changes of the 1960s and 1970s might just be that revolution itself. That is, there is an acceptance of the present, in the understanding that the present is change itself.

Why Europe, anyway? Just as John Cage wished for the USA to 'become just another part of the world, no more, no less', we might desire the same fate for Europe – with the important difference that its colonial and imperial adventures over the previous centuries have deeply affected other regions.[19] Nevertheless, art history and criticism of the period since 1945 are still dominated by studies of the succession of styles and movements in American art (abstract expressionism, pop art, minimalism, conceptual art) – up until the 1970s, at least, when such periodization became unsustainable. The history of art in postwar Europe complicates this narrative in interesting ways, since while modernism and a faith in progress were still in play to some degree, particularly amongst the artists who were committed to geometric modes of abstraction (*art concret*)

and to their further development in kinetic art, these paradigms were being challenged from the beginning of the postwar period by artists associated with *art informel* and with the Cobra movement – not to mention those affiliated with surrealism, or with the socialist-realist paradigm that was hastily institutionalized in the newly socialist countries of the eastern bloc – due to the very different histories, intellectual traditions and political possibilities in Europe. These gave rise to regional developments in a newly divided Europe that are quite different from those that pertained in the United States, even if there was, as we increasingly realize, rather more cross-fertilization between Europe and the US in the postwar period than was once recognized, and even though there was considerable opposition by artists to the hegemony of modernist art in the United States itself.[20] Since these developments remain understudied, let us focus on them to see what they might reveal to us. What they might have to reveal to us also depends, of course, on how we approach them.

Substance is never in its place

Sea sponges soaked in ultramarine pigment; torn sackcloth; plastic stretched and melted by fire; mud caked and coagulated into slabs; Bakelite telephones, false teeth, plastic toys, curtain rings and supermarket cleaning products crammed into vitrines; garbage, automobile carcasses and synthetic textiles; neon light tubes and aluminium rods; water, nails and light; sacks of earth and mussel shells; clay hand-moulded into rough tiles, their surfaces burnished with glassy, glittering glazes; food-stuffs like lard and chocolate; tar, sawdust, kaolin, acrylics, chalk, gold leaf and silver glitter, smoke and soot; fur, feathers, bones, and coagulated food remains; woodstain and oil, ladled, pasted and agglomerated onto receptive surfaces; polystyrene, plexiglas and stainless steel; cement poured into soaring spires and cavernous interiors, and stiffened like lava into formless and immobile lumps … or, the empty air of the street, animated by a gesture been and gone in an eye's blink.

Confirming Henri Focillon's observation that 'the matter, or substance, of an art is not a fixed datum that has been acquired once and for all', the attempt to catalogue the proliferating, heterogeneous array of substances found in modern artworks is bound to failure, for the list of entries is seemingly limitless. For an art historian such as Focillon, writing at a time when all of the arts took material form apart from music and dance, the vitality of matter was no foreign idea or new discovery. Rather, it was the essential, ever-active and variable, tangible, substance of form in art: 'matter, even in its most minute details, is always structure and activity, that is to say, form … the life that seems to inhabit matter has undergone metamorphosis.'[21] A strictly technical art history might begin the task of categorizing by medium, only to be overwhelmed by the effort of tracing a genealogy of metamorphosis. For as Roland Barthes notes, in an elaboration of Focillon's observation on the mutability of matter:

> It is not substance itself which is materialist (a stone when framed is merely a pure fetish), it is, so to speak, the infinitude of its transformations … substance is infallibly symbolic – in perpetual displacement; [the artist's] (social) function is to tell, to remind, to teach everyone that *substance is never in its place …*[22]

Writing on the deconstructive, corporeal materialism of the French artist Bernard Réquichot (*plate* 4), Barthes goes onto refute any notion of the artwork as a finished, autonomous form: 'The measure of a work of art no longer resides in its finality (the finished product which it constitutes)', he says, 'but in the labour it exhibits … in the process of its creation (and reading), its end is transformed.'[23]

The essays in this special issue confirm the general principle of the transformation of materials by artworks, contributing to an ever-proliferating network of investigations and interdisciplinary dialogue on what has seductively been called 'vibrant matter'.[24] Material culture, material processes, material meanings, immaterial materialities, material evidence, challenging materials, art matters, *matière de l'œuvre*, the aesthetics of matter, making do – materiality in the conceptual age, ordering matter, matter and mimesis; a cursory survey of conference topics from the last couple of years points to the pronounced 'material turn' in art history.[25] Art history here interacts with material culture studies, informed by anthropological and archaeological investigations of making, creativity and the question of material and object agency, alongside the very different kinds of information about the materiality of artworks that

4 Bernard Réquichot, *Le réliquaire de la fôret*, 1957–1958. Mixed media, painting agglomerations in a wooden box, 66.05 × 45.05 × 28.03 cm. Paris: Centre Pompidou – Musée national d'art moderne – Centre de création industrielle. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London. Photo: © Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, dist. RMN-Grand Palais/ Jacqueline Hyde.

conservation science and technical history provide.[26] The return to matter, materiality and materialism is not an isolated phenomenon, or particular to art history, as both the return to Marxism evident amongst certain philosophers and social critics, and the 'new-materialist' orientation of theorists who argue for the independent vitality of matter, catalyse renewed discussion across the humanities.[27] Art history might seem especially implicated in the critique of anthropocentrism advanced by the new materialists. Within the new-materialist orbit, and its attempt to ventriloquize the autonomous life of things, the object-oriented ontological stance promotes 'an explanation in objects themselves' where paintings, for example, are 'made of more things than just humans'. Seductive as its broad vision of the aesthetic realm may be, it seems to us that such a 'realist magic' is as yet quite distant from the art-historical investigation of materiality and materialism in the lives of artworks, including their promiscuous mobility and their resistance to our interpretation.[28]

The artist engages with the material dimension of artistic practice through the handling of materials, while the beholder encounters the art object in some form, which is an experiential mode of knowing for both maker and beholder that is different from, though not completely separate from, theoretical knowledge. The reward for an attentive questioning of how an artwork is made is a more nuanced and particular understanding of how specific material properties and processes contribute to a complex kind of knowledge. That is to say, materials mediate between making (producing forms of tacit knowledge) and knowing, in an epistemological manoeuvre that art historians have not always fully taken the measure of.

Referring to Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Stewart Martin writes that the artwork is a fetish of sorts which, despite its status as an object for sale, resists its reduction to exchange-value to the degree that its organization differs from that of standardized goods. To this extent, it is an object which appears to be a subject.[29] The idea that objects are only exchangeable goods is a consequence of capitalist exchange, but the material artwork is not wholly reducible to such exchange, notwithstanding a prejudice towards the art object as such in recent curatorial practice.[30] This does not mean that the artwork is free of the effects of the universal commodification of all goods and experiences in contemporary society. It is a reification of labour and value, which is not completely determined beforehand but which emerges in the process of its making.

Much of this thinking is familiar from Marxism, for which self-realization was inextricable from the transformation of materials.[31] While this understanding informed the intellectual and artistic activities of Jorn and Claus, certainly, it was not so much a part of the conceptual apparatus of the other artists discussed in this issue as it was of the critical discourse of the era, since before the advent of post-structuralist thought Marxism was more often a component of one's intellectual formation than is common today. Insofar as this transformation of materials was conceived as a negative labour, as a reshaping of recalcitrant matter, new materialists like Pheng Cheah have been critical of Marxism as not accounting enough for the dynamism and generativity of matter – for seeing it as something inert and wholly subject to human determination.[32] To the extent that actually existing socialist regimes have been as indifferent to the consequences of their actions on the planetary ecosystem as market-oriented liberal democracies are, this is an appropriate criticism of Marxist materialism. Regardless of artists' political orientation in the postwar period, however, there was evidently an awareness amongst themselves that the interaction with materials was intrinsic to their practice, and that this interaction was capable of generating unforeseen results, whether through mark-making or through the gathering and recombination of found materials. Indeed, this reworking involves

an engagement with the material, its (often poetic) transformation, and not just an acceptance of the given state of matter.[33]

We have pilfered our title for this issue from the French philosopher of science Gaston Bachelard, whose concept of the 'material imagination' was elaborated in a set of studies of the four elements – water, fire, earth and air – and their relationship to the human imagination. Like Freud, Bachelard was committed to an enlightenment project that maps the workings of the mind. His key lesson was that substance and ideas, including science itself, are not immutable but always exist in process. For our purposes here, the importance of Bachelard's work is its suggestion that the interpretation of matter should not be left to scientists or technicians alone, but that there is a crucial place for artistic practice in determining both the visible identity of material substances and the specific properties of things and their invisible, obscure or non-empirical significance. For Bachelard, the material cause in aesthetics had been neglected and the material imagination is the matrix of a question, or problematic.[34]

Charting a distinct path in and around the three large paradigms of twentieth-century thought seeking to explain humankind's relationship to the world – existentialism, Marxism, phenomenology – Bachelard brings both the history of science and his exegesis of the material imagination under the rubric of a new epistemology.[35] In Bachelard's thinking, the aesthetic object, like the scientific object, is created through a dialectical synthesis of reflective thought and material process. The material imagination nourishes both hand and eye in the production of formal or surface images that take concrete, sensible form as artworks.[36] Bachelard insists on the indeterminacy, opacity and refractory nature of the imaginary, but above all, the artwork is given explanatory power about material substance, beyond the empirical (to which appeals to reality, realism and the real are so often limited).[37] Through a theory of the material imagination, this new mode of knowledge formation takes the psychic, poetic and artistic realms of creativity seriously as research founded upon the possibility – and necessity – of openness to the exploration of the unknown. The potential for transformative ruptures in convention that may result from experimental procedures bears within it the potential for radical change. In another formulation, this potential is akin to what the German philosopher Ernst Bloch called 'anticipatory illumination'. For Bloch, this utopian possibility is why 'art drives its material in actions, situations, or forms to an end ... it provides a *connection to knowledge* at the very least, and it provides a connection to the *material of grasped hope* at the very most.' Contrary to the passive contemplation of beauty or the idealism of form, Bloch posits 'the theory of an unfinished world and the actual richness of reality, namely, reality that is in *process and open*, especially in view of its totality.'[38]

To be sure, not all of the contributions in this special issue utilize, or need, Bachelard's material imagination or Bloch's utopian plea to sustain their arguments. As Adorno famously wrote in the early pages of *Negative Dialectics*, 'objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder', and it is the material dimension of this remainder in which we are interested here.[39] The object is something different from and not reducible to ourselves, which in its material dimension resists our conceptual systems – even those of the artists who made them. Artists work the breaches between matter and meaning as much as the literal connections to forge an ambiguous and enigmatic space for interpretation to take place, including that written by art historians. The key tasks for us have been, firstly, to attend to the material dimension of artistic practice, as opposed to an exclusive emphasis on concept or context, and secondly, to account for the importance of matter and

materialism to the artists whose work and approaches are discussed in our essays. This is not the reinstatement of a material/conceptual opposition, though, given that there is a continual interaction between thought and practice, and that practice itself involves thinking of some sort at every step of the way. Rather, it is the expression of a conviction that an attention to how something is made, as well as what it is made of, is key not just to understanding artworks in and of themselves, but of how they relate to the social and cultural systems from which they arise.

Notes

We wish to thank the anonymous reader of this special issue for their invaluable input.

1 See Serge Vandercam, 'Souvenirs et traces' and Clotilde de Peneranda, 'Cobra ou "l'enfange de l'art": Histoire d'une amitié partagée', in *Cobra en fange. Vandercam-Dotremont: Dessin-Écriture-Matière (1958–1960)*, Brussels, 1994; and also see Karen Kurczynski's essay in this issue.

2 Pol Bury, 'La Pièce montée à la pierre', *Cobra*, 2, 21 March 1949, n.p. [2]. *Cobra 1948–51*, Paris, 1980.

3 The first large-scale version of *Unendliche Schleife (Endless Loop)* was completed in plaster in 1947, based on drawings that date from the 1930s. The 1947 sculpture was later realized on different scales and in different materials in several versions, including the one illustrated here.

4 Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art* (1934), New York, 1989, 96.

5 A non-exhaustive list of exhibitions taking the end of the war in Europe as a catalyst includes: *1946, L'Art de la Reconstruction*, Antibes and Geneva, 1996; *Repartir à zéro 1945–1949: Comme si la peinture n'avait jamais existé*, Lyon, 2008; *Paris Post War: Art and Existentialism 1945–55*, London, 1993; *L'Art en Europe: Les années décisives 1945–1953*, Saint-Étienne, 1987; *Europa nach der Flut: Kunst 1945–1965*, Barcelona and Vienna, 1995.

6 Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*, New York and London, 1996.

7 For Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde* (1974), trans. Michael Shaw, Minneapolis, MN, 1984, the neo-avant-garde is an uncritical, reiterative phenomenon in relation to what he calls the 'historical avant-gardes' of Dada, surrealism and constructivism. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh sees Yves Klein as a key example of this kind of practice in 'The primary colors for the second time: A paradigm repetition of the neo-avant-garde', *October*, 37, Summer 1986, 41–52, though his viewpoint is nuanced in *Neo-avant-garde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, Cambridge, MA, 2000. Hal Foster, 'What's neo about the neo-avant-garde?', *October*, 70, Fall 1994, updates and validates the term in relation to artists such as Daniel Buren or Marcel Broodthaers. For a historiography, see Natalie Adamson and Toby Norris, 'Introduction', *Academics, Pompiers, Official Artists and the Arrière-garde: Art in France, 1900–1960*, Newcastle, 2009, 1–24; David Hopkins, ed., *Neo-avant-garde*, Amsterdam and New York, 2006; and the case study by Jill Carrick, *Nouveau Réalisme, 1960s France, and the Neo-avant-garde: Topographies of Chance and Return*, Farnham and Burlington, VT, 2010.

8 Nicola Pezolet, 'Bauhaus ideas: Jorn, Max Bill and reconstruction culture', *October*, 141, Summer 2012, 86–110. See also *Max Bill: No Beginning No End*, Herford and Zürich, 2008; and Lars Müller, ed., *Max Bill's View of Things:* Die gute Form, *an Exhibition 1949*, Zürich, 2015.

9 See Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*, trans. Anna Brzyski, London, 2009, chapter 4; Brandon Taylor, *After Constructivism*, New Haven, CT and London, 2014; *Force Fields: Phases of the Kinetic*, Barcelona, 2000; Lynn Zelevansky, *Beyond Geometry: Experiments in Form, 1940s–1970s*, Los Angeles, CA and Cambridge, MA, 2004; *L'Œil moteur: Art optique et cinétique 1950–1975*, Strasbourg, 2005; Serge Lemoine, *Dynamo: Un Siècle de lumière et de mouvement dans l'art, 1913–2013*, Paris, 2013.

10 Michel Tapié and Georges Mathieu made this case in particular. For their art criticism, see Tapié, *Un Art autre où il s'agit de nouveaux dévidages du réel*, Paris, 1952; Francesc Vicens, *Prolégomènes à une esthétique autre de Michel Tapié*, Barcelona, 1960; Tapié, *Manifeste indirect dans un temps autre*, Torino, 1961; Mathieu, *De la révolte à la renaissance: Au-delà du tachisme*, Paris, 1972, and *L'Abstraction prophétique*, Paris, 1984. See further: Dore Ashton, *À rebours: La Rebelión informalista, 1939–1968*, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1999; *Le Grand Geste!: Informel und Abstrakter Expressionismus, 1946–1964*, Köln, 2010.

11 Tadeusz Kantor, 'Abstraction Is Dead – Long Live Abstraction' (1957), translated and quoted in Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta*, 76, and 61–104, on the production and reception of *art informel* as a feature of the 'cultural thaw' after 1956 in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia.

12 On the situation of Yugloslavia, see Ješa Denegri, 'Inside or outside "Socialist Modernism"? Radical views on the Yugoslav art scene, 1950–1970', in Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković, eds, *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant-Gardes and Post-Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918–1991*, Cambridge, MA, 1993, 170–98. For Germany, see Yule Heibel, *Reconstructing the Subject: Modernist Painting in Western Germany, 1945–50*, New Haven, CT, 1995; John-Paul Stonard, *Fault Lines: Art in Germany 1945–1955*, London, 2007; Susanne Leeb, 'Abstraction as international language', in Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann, eds, *Art of Two Germanys: Cold War Cultures*, New York and Los Angeles, CA, 2009, 118–33; Eckhart Gillen, ed., *German Art from Beckmann to Richter: Images of a Divided Country*, Cologne and London, 1997.

13 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (1896), trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer, New York, 1991, 223.

14 Giulio Carlo Argan, *Fautrier: Matière et mémoire*, trans. Peter Ruvens, Milan, 1960, 47. The weight of history was given existentialist expression by others, e.g. Hannah Arendt, who limned a bleak picture of the present as a prison, incapable of escaping the burdensome weight of the past or the eschatological predictions for the future, in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, New York, 1961. For a more recent analysis along the same lines, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *After 1945: Latency as the Origin of the Present*, Stanford, CA, 2013.

15 For an exploration of this notion, see Natalie Adamson, 'Vestiges of the future: Temporality in the early work of Pierre Soulages', *Art History*, 35: 1, February 2012, 126–51; and further, the essays on Soulages, Claus and Opałka in this issue.

16 Hannah Feldman, *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945–1962*, Durham, NC, and London, 2014, pointedly critiques the term 'postwar' in her analysis of the years in which France was engaged in colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria. The term chronotope is from Mikhail Bahktin, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel' (1937), in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin, TX, 1981, 84–258. Bahktin defines it as the fusion or 'intrinsic connectedness' of time and space, where 'time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history' (84).

17 Mark Mazower, 'The end of Eurocentrism', *Critical Inquiry*, 40, Summer 2014, 298–313; Nuit Banai, 'From nation-state to borderstate: Exhibiting Europe', *Third Text*, 27: 4, 2013, 456–69.

18 On the consciousness of temporality in modernity, see Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, London, 1995, and on 'crisis' as an indicator of the pressure of time, see Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing, Spacing, History*, trans. Todd Samuel Presner and others, Stanford, CA, 2002, 238–9.

19 John Cage, quoted as the epigraph in Katy Siegel, *Since '45: America and the Making of Contemporary Art*, London, 2011.

20 Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, eds, *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, Minneapolis, MN, 1993; Jacquelynn Baas, ed., *Fluxus and the Essential*

Questions of Life, Hanover, NH and Chicago, IL, 2011; *The Anarchy of Silence: John Cage and Experimental Art*, Barcelona and Høvikodden, 2009; Carlos Basualdo and Erica F. Battle, eds, *Dancing around the Bride: Cage, Cunningham, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Duchamp*, Philadelphia, PA and New Haven, CT, 2012; Michael Duncan and Kristine McKenna, *Semina Culture: Wallace Berman and His Circle*, Santa Monica, CA and New York, 2005.

21 Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, 96–9. For an engaging effort to account for the materials of modern art, see Florence de Mèredieu, *Histoire matérielle et immatérielle de l'art moderne & contemporain*, Paris, 2008.

22 Roland Barthes, 'Réquichot and his Body' (1973), trans. Richard Howard, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1991, 222 (Barthes' italics).

23 Barthes, 'Réquichot and his Body', 227. The intended illustration here was Bernard Réquichot (1929– 1961), *Réliquaire de la nature et de la matière avec cadre orné d'une molure d'époque*, 1957. For images of this inscribed reliquary of painting (CR 312), see www.bernard-requichot.org.

24 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, NC and London, 2010.

25 All of these phrases are cited from conference titles posted on art-historical information forum H-Arthist.net. There is a notable strength in medieval and early modern art history in this respect. See, for example, titles such as *The Matter of Art: Materials, Practices, Cultural Logics, c.1250–1750*, eds Christy Anderson, Anne Dunlop and Pamela H. Smith, Manchester, 2015; *Revival and Invention: Sculpture through its Material Histories*, eds Sébastien Clerbois and Martina Droth, Oxford, 2011; 'Res et significatio: The Material Sense of Things in the Middle Ages', eds Aden Kumler and Christopher R. Lakey, *Gesta*, 51: 1, 2012; Anne-Sophie Lehmann, ed., 'How materials make meaning', *Netherlands Yearbook for the History of Art*, 62: 1, 2013; Angela Vanhaelen and Bronwen Wilson, eds, *The Erotics of Looking: Materiality, Solicitation and Netherlandish Visual Culture*, special issue of *Art History*, 35: 5, November 2012.

26 For one effort to establish a 'new historiography', see the editorial 'A new history of conservation and technical studies', *Burlington Magazine*, 157: 1351, October 2015.

27 See Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, eds, *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' through the Arts*, London, 2012; Daniel Miller, ed., *Materiality*, Durham, NC, 2005; Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, London and Durham, NC, 2010; C. Cox, J. Jaskey and S. Malik, eds, *Realism Materialism Art*, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY and Berlin, 2015; http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/new-historical-materialisms/1022/3.

28 Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*, Ann Arbor, MI, 2013, 17–18, 24, 49. For an instructive critique, see Steven Goldsmith, 'Almost gone: Rembrandt and the ends of materialism', *New Literary History*, 45: 3, Summer 2014, 411–44.

29 Stewart Martin, 'Critique of relational aesthetics', *Third Text*, 21: 4, July 2007, 374–5.

30 For an example, see Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, '"The dance was very frenetic, lively, rattling, clanging, rolling, contorted, and lasted for a long time"', *dOCUMENTA (13): The Book of Books*, Ostfildern, 2013,44.

31 For a brief précis on this essentially Hegelian orientation, see Herbert Marcuse, 'A Note on Dialectic' (1960), in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds, *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, New York, 1982, 444–51.

32 Pheng Cheah, 'Non-dialectical materialism', in Coole and Frost, eds, *New Materialisms*, 87.

33 Poetic in the sense that materials are combined according to the associations suggested by the materials themselves rather than through a more analytic procedure.

34 Bachelard's methodology has been examined to date chiefly by historians of science and philosophers concerned with epistemological questions. For entry-point discussions, see Christina Chimisso, 'A matter of substance? Gaston Bachelard on chemistry's philosophical lessons', in M. C. Galavotti *et al.*, eds, *European Philosophy of Science – Philosophy of Science in Europe and the Viennese Heritage*, Cham, 2014, 33–44; and Patrice Maniglier, 'What is a problematic?', *Radical Philosophy*, 173, May–June 2012, 21–3. For Bachelard's influence on the later work of Georges Canguilhem, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, and Pierre Bourdieu, see Dominique Lecourt, *Marxism and Epistemology*, trans. Ben Brewster, London, 1975; Niilo Kauppi, *Radicalism in French Culture: A Sociology of French Theory in the 1960s*, Farnham and Burlington, VT, 2010; and Tom Eley, *Post-Rationalism: Psychoanalysis, Epistemology, and Marxism in Post-War France*, London and New York, 2013, 49–80. In this issue, Adamson and Kurczynski explore indirect and direct relationships between Bachelard's philosophy of the material imagination and artistic practice.

35 James L. Smith, 'New Bachelards? Reveries, elements and twenty-first-century materialism', *Altre Modernità*, 16 October 2012, 156–67, is one explicit attempt to link Bachelard's thought to the new materialist theory of Jane Bennett and others.

36 Although Bachelard goes unmentioned, Michael Ann Holly states, in 'Notes from the field: Materiality': 'A working definition is in order. I regard materiality as *the meeting of matter and imagination*, the place where opposites take refuge from their perpetual strife.' Holly, 'Notes from the field: Materiality', *Art Bulletin*, 95: 1, March 2013, 15.

37 Bachelard's focus on poetic work does not exclude the possibility of thinking about the material imagination in relation to the objects of the commercial, industrialized world. See, for example, Jeremy F. Lane, 'Towards a poetics of consumerism: Gaston Bachelard's "material imagination" and narratives of post-war modernisation,' *French Cultural Studies*, 17: 1, 2006, 19–34. Extending Bachelard, Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (1968), trans. James Benedict, London, 1996, 39, signposts the shift from organic materials to synthetic substances, and as a consequence, from symbolic naturalness to a 'polymorphous' and abstract state, 'which makes possible a universal play of associations among materials'.

38 Ernst Bloch, 'The Wish-Landscape Perspective in Aesthetics: The Order of Art Materials According to the Dimension of Their Profundity and Hope', (1959), in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Meckleburg, Cambridge, MA, 1988, 724 (Bloch's emphases).

39 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (1966), trans. E. B. Ashton, New York, 1973, 5.