

## Nicole Burisch

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Nicole Burisch's practice includes writing, curating, and artistic activity. She has worked for numerous artist-run organizations, including Centre des arts actuels Skol in Montreal, and the Mountain Standard Time Performative Art Festival in Calgary. She co-authored (with Anthea Black) a chapter in *Extra-Ordinary: An Anthology of Craft and Contemporary Art* (Duke University Press), and has contributed writing to such periodicals as *FUSE*, *No More Potlucks*, and the *Cahiers métiers d'art/Craft Journal*. She received her MA in Art History from Montreal's Concordia University in 2011.

## Material Fluency/Material Agency/ Material Appropriation: Notes on *Making Otherwise* and the Use of Craft in Contemporary Art

In a 2014 review "The Meaning of Clay at the Whitney Biennial," critic Sarah Archer added to the growing collection of articles about how craft materials and processes are being adapted and included in contemporary art. In her article, Archer specifically addresses the ceramic work of artists Sterling Ruby and John Mason and more broadly the inclusion of craft in the section of the biennial curated by Michelle Grabner. Archer's article is remarkable in that it also accounts for the perspectives of those in the craft world, adeptly describing why these kinds of curatorial choices have not always found appreciation from ceramic artists or those in the craft establishment, who tend to perceive the inclusion of this work as a threat to their longstanding efforts to have craft recognized within the field of fine art. After years of fighting for inclusion, there is an understandable sting for the craft community when artists gain acclaim for using (and in some cases appropriating) the materials and processes that have been the purview of craft all along.

Archer pinpoints how the overwhelming bias of craft history has focused on skilled making, and notes that "...all of this history can weigh heavily on a person. It can make the sight of cavalier treatment of *any* traditional material, clay in particular, feel offensive, even painful, as though centuries of cultural memory were being cruelly cast aside and forgotten."<sup>1</sup> These anxieties about the contemporary treatment of craft materials are not completely unfounded, and it's important to recognize that Archer's notion of "cavalier" relates not only to applications of skill—which she reads through and against work like Ruby's which deploys a seemingly "sloppy" approach to materials—but also to the treatment of craft's historical position. Following the legacies of artists like Mike Kelly, Tracey Emin, or Grayson Perry—and certainly related to the prevalence and permeability of so-called "outsider" art—much of the appeal of craft (materials) for contemporary art and artists continues to stem from the historical associations with craft's marginalized position. This connection is emphasized

by a frequently un(der)skilled or naive approach to materials, described by Garth Clark as “The ‘look Ma, I just found ceramics’ moment in the fine arts.”<sup>2</sup> As Clark has noted, rather than representing a victory for craft, these inclusions are “the result of the liberalizing impact of postmodernism and its promiscuous approach to means and matter;”<sup>3</sup> and, I would add, tend to reinforce rather than challenge traditional insider/outsider or high/low binaries. At its worst, an ahistorical or tokenistic use of craft materials can approach a form of appropriation, glossing over the practices and voices of the women, people of color, and indigenous communities whose historical exclusion from fine art canons or discourses has often hinged on a dismissal of their work as craft.

It’s with this broader context in mind that I approach my discussion of *Making Otherwise: Craft and Material Fluency in Contemporary Art*, with the goal of thinking through how (re)negotiations of craft materials feature in this exhibition, and more broadly within the landscape of contemporary art. *Making Otherwise* took place at the Carleton University Art Gallery in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada from May 12 to September 14, 2014 and included work by artists Richard Boulet, Ursula Johnson, Marc Courtemanche, Paul Mathieu, Sarah Maloney, and Janet Morton. In contrast to the intentionally sloppy approaches that are the hallmark of much of the current application of craft in contemporary art, curator Heather Anderson instead focused the exhibition on a selection of artists who are engaging with craft materials and practices through highly skilled approaches, albeit with what Anderson refers to as “material fluency,” a rethinking or repositioning of traditional applications of those skills. Despite their differences, the material fluency of the works in *Making Otherwise* and the sloppy applications of craft in contemporary art both depart from strictly traditional ways of handling craft materials, and both do this through a direct engagement with the properties of their chosen material. Making, in this sense, requires not only an application of skill to shape a particular material, but also involves a kind of knowledge that emerges from the material itself. Like Archer, I want to acknowledge the (mis)stakes surrounding the “cavalier” treatment of materials, while at the same time recognize that there might be something to gain from practices and readings that engage deeply, differently, or irreverently with the matter and potentials of a given material. To be clear, I am not the craft police, and I am not at all interested in articulating a “legitimate” use or user for craft. But it is worth thinking through how the histories and materials of craft are being represented in current practice, as well as recalling how particular power dynamics may still be at play in these uses.



Janet Morton, video still from *Road Trip*, 2012  
video shot & edited by Nick Montgomery, unraveling by  
Robert Kingsbury



Ursula Johnson, *Male Dis-enfranchised, L'nuweli'k (We Are Indian)*, 2014  
 Performance organized by Carleton University  
 Art Gallery as part of *Making Otherwise: Craft and  
 Material Fluency in Contemporary Art*.  
 Photo by Justin Wonnacott, courtesy of the artist.

Fashion theorist Minh-ha T. Pham has recently argued for a more nuanced understanding around processes of cultural appropriation in fashion. Taking up the use of so-called “Chinatown bag plaid” pattern by high-fashion designers such as Marc Jacobs and Stella McCartney, Pham points out that this pattern in fact has its origins amongst centuries-old designs used by Indonesian elite. She argues that what often gets omitted in conversations about cultural appropriation, are the longer histories of how certain fashion items or patterns have originated or circulated historically, pointing out that straightforward claims of appropriation assume an already existing hierarchical relationship between white Western fashion designers and the cultures from which they borrow. Rather than assuming this particular power dynamic as a given, she proposes an “inappropriate” discourse as

one that reframes the debate to include all the things that are not carried over when white Western creators swipe from elsewhere... inappropriate discourse asks what is not appropriate-able, what cannot be integrated into and continue to maintain the existing power structure of the high fashion system, and why. In doing so, we truly challenge the idea of the absolute power and authority of the West to control how the world sees, knows, and talks about fashion.<sup>4</sup>

With this in mind, I am wondering how an “inappropriate” discourse might be brought into readings of the kinds of material-centered engagements that accompany the evolving uses for craft in contemporary art. Rather than thinking about craft materials as always representative of histories of marginalization and exclusion, perhaps we might learn to read them “inappropriately,” accounting for the things that exist outside of systems of power and oppression. My sense is that this kind of reading would need to account for both the properties of the material itself and the ways that these have circulated historically.

Much of the production of traditional craft objects has been informed by a desire for function (a sweater that fits, a teapot that doesn't drip, a basket that holds something), and the negotiation of these aims with/through the material is what creates and shapes the behaviors and movements unique to a particular practice. I would be leaving something out if I didn't acknowledge that my reading here is colored by my own experiences working with clay: I spent my undergraduate studies as a ceramics major in a program with a strong emphasis on technical skill, following three years in an intensive after-school ceramics program in high school.

Beyond the most immediate hands-in-clay interface between artist and material, there are specific gestures and practices for working with clay that directly relate to the properties of the material itself: wedging clay to remove air bubbles and align the particles to prepare it for working, regulating humidity during the drying process by wrapping a pot in plastic, slipping and scoring the edge of handle to stick it to the body of a cup, moving slowly to arrange items in the kiln so that they don't touch and fuse together during the firing. Both my formal training and my own experiences of working with clay shape how I think about the properties and potential uses of this material. Just as importantly, together these form the foundation for a set of internalized rules that govern how I imagine one is "supposed to" use this material. We might think of this intersection of traditional and practical knowledge as a form of historical material baggage, a constellation of tools, skills, expectations, behaviors, and gestures specific to a given material, albeit ones that may translate or evolve across cultures, places, and times. This is part of the "weight" that Archer is talking about, and this baggage continues to inform how those working with craft materials relate to what is possible, whether they are working with or against traditional applications. At the same time, craft's own historical adherence to values of skill, technical mastery, and material-centered practice can easily serve as something to work against, the heaviness of this history its own easy target. The move inherent in any kind of "mis-use" of a particular craft material is often an intentional rejection of the historical vocabularies of skilled making associated with that material.

Recent strands of philosophical inquiry have turned to questions of matter, materiality, and the central (though often neglected) influence of non-human entities and objects. Considerations of "new materialism," "vital materiality," and object-oriented ontologies have brought objects, materials, and matter to the fore, insisting on their influence or even agency. Jane Bennett describes this vitality as "the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and design of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own."<sup>5</sup> Surprisingly little has been written from a craft perspective in relation to these strands of thinking, perhaps because material-centered thinking and making are already at the heart of how many crafters conceive of their work. However, craft and craft theory are well-poised to address the idea that an object or material may be exerting an influence on those who engage with it. We might think of this as a form of material agency,

a potential that is echoed in the material focus of practices like the ones in *Making Otherwise*. In her curatorial text, Anderson elaborates on the idea of material fluency, a term that arose through her discussions with artist Marc Courtemanche about his approach to working with ceramics, and specifically his integration of traditional woodworking skills into his work in clay in order to create *trompe l'oeuil* installations. This material fluency applies to many of the artists in the exhibition, describing the ways in which they are engaging with the properties of a given material, but (re)applying or translating them into new uses or contexts. In reading through two of the works in *Making Otherwise* here, I am interested in thinking through how material exerts an influence on the maker and the process of making, and how material fluency and agency might intersect in these practices.

In Janet Morton's videos, wool thread is present as an active force that shapes, intrudes upon, alters, or controls the behaviors of those who engage with it. In *Road Trip*, a young man slowly unravels the full body wool suit he is wearing, while walking through the outskirts of a small town. As he walks, he moves with a certain grace and regularity, keeping a steady pace, matched by the camera. While the job of undoing the wool suit is a simple task in some regards, the contortions it provokes intervene into the rhythm of the man's highly controlled walking, though they never stop him entirely. Feminist theorist Karen Barad has elaborated a posthumanist understanding of performativity, one that "allows matter its due as an active participant in the world's becoming"<sup>6</sup> and one that also notably accounts for the matter and materiality of the body.<sup>7</sup> In *Road Trip*, this performativity is communicated through the movement of wool thread as it encounters and influences the movements and matter of the walking body, passing through stages of utility and uselessness, from a form of protection to a burden. As the man bends and pauses to wind the wool, and as the unwieldy ball of wound wool continues to grow in size, the performance traces the variable qualities of the material: both its weight and its lightness, its solidity and its flexibility. It is also significant that the off-white suit is an unusual and ambiguous garment, a prop for the performance, unrecognizable as a standard form but one that still holds multiple possible iterations within its shape. At various points throughout the performance, it refers to actual items of clothing (shorts, sweater, shirt, underwear) and in turn, a history of knitting and textile work in service of covering or protecting the body. Nevertheless, the suit is constantly changing throughout the work, the material in a state of (un) becoming anything traditionally functional or static. Moving body and

raveling wool are caught in a hypnotic encounter between two materialities, each shaping and changing the other.

Both the fluency of the material and the materiality of the body intersect again in Ursula Johnson's work *L'nuwelti'k (We Are Indian)*, where she uses traditional Mi'kmaq basket-weaving skills to create an armor-like bust over the head of a volunteer, found through a call that identifies participants in relation to their status as indigenous people as determined by the Canadian Indian Act. Here, the manipulation of the white ash strips is done in relation to a body whose external limits are traced and extended in a customized covering, created while in dialog with the person sitting and done in light of the application of outside systems of legislation and control to the indigenous body. Anthropologist Tim Ingold describes the specific material negotiations that make basket-weaving a form of making-becoming unlike any other:

The actual concrete form of the basket, however, does not issue from the idea. It rather comes into being through the gradual unfolding of that field of forces set up through the active and sensuous engagement of practitioner and material. This field is neither internal to the material nor internal to the practitioner; rather it cuts across the emergent interface between them. Effectively, the form of the basket emerges through a pattern of skilled movement, and it is the rhythmic repetition of that movement that gives rise to the regularity of form.<sup>8</sup>

This reading echoes the approach to materials that Johnson learned from her great-grandmother, Caroline Gould, who taught her that "the maker does not manipulate the wood, but rather the wood manipulates the maker into understanding what it can do."<sup>9</sup> Basket-weaving in this sense represents a form of intimate co-creation, a dialogue between weaver and material, moving through tension and manipulation and in Johnson's case, responding to and emerging from the human form beneath, a third force in the "gradual unfolding" of material and of narrative. In this work, traditional skills and materials are extrapolated to represent the negotiation between self and other, state and individual, with the material actively shaping the process and rhythm of making as much as the artist.

These two works from *Making Otherwise* are representative of a way of engaging with craft that acknowledges the historical baggage of their materials by using skilled (un)making as a means to dialogue with and rethink this baggage, tracing the possibilities for what can be adapted or

appropriated, and what cannot. Given the multiple iterations and applications of craft broadly, we are now in an increasingly complicated terrain that includes artists employing craft materials in ways that disregard or react to historical conventions, craft artists making work that circulates as contemporary art, and curators revisiting historical craft works and processes as a means to rectify past omissions and reflect on the present. Intersecting and informing these applications are the overlapping educational systems and markets that value and authenticate works variously as art, craft, folk, outsider, or something in between. Material promiscuity, borrowing, and remixing are rife and it may no longer be possible or even desirable to dictate "appropriate" uses for a particular material. What Archer's article does, and what others might also endeavor to do, is engage with ceramics (and craft broadly) as *an historic material*, albeit one that has the potential to move and change and be transformed and that is "still yielding new points of view."<sup>10</sup> It is possible that for craft, one of the things that can't ever really be swiped or borrowed or integrated into existing power structures are the qualities of the material: its properties, propensities, influence, fluency, agency, and the ways in which these are always already intertwined with their own historical material baggage. This is what the works in *Making Otherwise* communicate: a sense of the material properties that shape their making, and a sense of how these properties carry their historical weight.

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#### Notes

1. Sarah Archer, "The Meaning of Clay at the Whitney Biennial," *Hyperallergic*, April 24, 2014, accessed December 31, 2015, <http://hyperallergic.com/122270/the-meaning-of-clay-at-the-whitney-biennial/>.
2. Garth Clark, "David Salle and the Little Pot-Shop of Horrors," *cFile*, March 25, 2015, accessed December 31, 2015, <https://cfileonline.org/exhibition-garth-clark-david-salle-and-the-little-pot-shop-of-horrors/>.
3. Garth Clark, *How Envy Killed the Crafts Movement: An Autopsy in Two Parts* (Portland: Museum of Contemporary Craft and Pacific Northwest College of Art, 2008), 32.
4. Minh-ha T. Pham, "Fashion's Cultural Appropriation Debate: Pointless," *The Atlantic*, May 15, 2014, accessed December 31 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/05/cultural-appropriation-in-fashion-stop-talking-about-it/370826/>.
5. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.
6. Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* vol. 28 no. 3 (2003): 803.
7. *Ibid.*, 808-810.
8. Tim Ingold, "On weaving a basket," in *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 342.
9. Heather Anderson, "Ursula Johnson: Weaving Histories and Netukulimk in L'nuwelti'k (*We Are Indian*) and Other Works" in *Craft on Demand: The New Politics of the Handmade*, edited by Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch, (London: I.B. Tauris, forthcoming), n.p.
10. Sarah Archer, "The Meaning of Clay at the Whitney Biennial," *Hyperallergic* April 24, 2014, accessed December 31, 2015, <http://hyperallergic.com/122270/the-meaning-of-clay-at-the-whitney-biennial/>.

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