

POETICS OF MATERIALITY

The materiality of artistic practice has often been taken for granted as a simple part of the process of production phase in the making of a work of art but as thereby minor to the reading and appreciation and reading the work itself. The great tradition of abstraction was in fact a multivalent practice not to defined by one singular approach or form. Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian certainly set a course but, even amongst them, the options were multiple. These artists and others set the lineaments of future paths explored in the post war period, most notably coming out of North America, Germany, France, Italy and Japan.

However, we should not overlook the period of constructivism that began to take formation in the period of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and shortly thereafter. In particular, I would wish to single out Rodchenko who, along with Tatlin, early on produced work that constituted a major breakthrough in the approach to artistic practice. Rodchenko's work crossed forms of practice to combine both painting and sculpture and what would be referred to later as, installation. He paid primary attention to his materials as the core of his artwork. Unlike the earlier Russian generation of Malevich and Kandinsky, his work did not seek a transcendental or spiritual dimension. Rather, Rodchenko was fascinated by the concrete materiality of a changing world, a world around him that was in the midst of the rapid advance of industrial modernization. Like Tatlin and El Lissitzky, Rodchenko and his colleagues sought to work within and champion the spirit of modernization. As they saw it, if people could appreciate the basic forms and materiality of their practice, they would advance their understanding and appreciation of the benefits of modernization in their daily lives.

One hundred years on, much has changed. Modernization has entered another phase of post-industrialism and internationalism has been swept up by the era of globalization. In the process of these changes, the world has become infinitely more interconnected. The spirit of internationalism led to a breakdown of isolationist politics and decrease in nationalism that has however, intermittently resurged. People learnt about what other countries, cultures and their people were doing. Ideological and physical boundaries have become surmountable in part through the web and artists in Asia are able to explore what the artistic practice of their contemporaries elsewhere. From this perspective, an attempt to trace some local predecessor is, in part, folly although, the character of the artwork itself might well provoke some reflection on its significance to an understanding of the local or immediate surroundings.

The exhibition 'Poetics of Materiality' is composed of artwork by four artists Ringo Bunoan (The Philippines), Young Rim Lee (South Korea), Ng Joon Kiat (Singapore) and Yu Ji (China), coming from four different countries that together span East and Southeast Asia. Placed besides one another, the artwork of these four artists show a certain unity as much as a distinction. This unity is, in essence, a commitment to the materiality of artistic practice not simply the basis of much of artistic practice but, as its subject.

The process and very making or construction of their work is integral to the subject itself. The work gains its inspiration not from some external factor, as if imposed

from without. Rather, the work builds through and out of itself. That is, it comes from within, out of a then unclear logic inscribed in the first lineaments, if not principles, of its construction. The understanding of this logic comes through the process of working and reflection and working again. There is a slow succession of decisive actions, additions or interventions. There is nothing swift about this process nor necessarily certain. It may fail or not succeed to build. Or, hopefully, it will gain momentum and the process continues to a point where it is complete.

The work *The Wall* of Ringo Bunoan begins with the gathering of bed pillows, building up a virtual wall of these commonplace objects. Something as mundane as pillows are made monumental through this act alone. By virtue of the accumulation and its un-manipulated presentation by the artist, the artwork recalls the tradition of minimalism, notably artists such as Carl Andre. Gina Osterloh writes of its 'eloquence,' noting how pillows "are the sites of physical rest and rejuvenation, as well as cradles of our ideas, memories, nightmares and dreams."⁽¹⁾ The work was first presented in 2008 in which a stack of differently coloured found pillows. Exhibited as a long line of pillows along a wall, they appeared similar to that of sandbags in a bunker. At that time, she also mounted her solo exhibition *Pillow Talk* at Silverlens Gallery in Manila, which included a series of photographs taken in Nepal of pairs of pillows tied together. These works bring together the everyday and ephemeral to create a conceptual homage to the monumentality of dreams and memories as a body of unspoken collective experience.

Similarly, Yu Ji builds upon pre-existing materials, some of which have been fabricated, some not. She has worked across a number of media forms, including installation and performance. However, the essence of her finest work belongs to drawing out the essence of pre-existing materials and forms. This is evident in a series entitled 'Public Space' in which she uses various media such as wood, plaster, wax, stone to create free-standing forms. As with Nos. 1 & 2 in this series, Yu Ji, these objects are reminiscent of disused or old public buildings, such as public lavatories, or open containers, one can come across on the vacant lots in streets of any city or town. They counter the idea of the monumental, rather celebrating the anti-monumental. Nothing is edifying about their status. And yet, re-presented and re-formed as an artwork, they provoke a rethinking of the discarded, a reevaluation of their value. They accrue a value not only as aesthetic objects but, as symbolic of the value in the commonplace or abandoned.

As a counterpoint to these two artists, the artwork of both Young Rim Lee and Ng Joon Kiat engage with painting not as subject to illusionism but, in distinct manners, as a physical material object. This is the unifying thread that links these four artists together.

Young Rim Lee's work is built up of wood cut both in rectangular and other shapes that are both individually painted and laid on top of one another. Each work is composed of at least two such pieces. The wood is grainy, a quality made more clear by the application of acrylic paint. The finished work is hung on the wall, protruding out as a physical object. Its object-ness is strongly evident in the same manner as Donald Judd's work. It intervenes if not occupies the immediately surrounding space

¹ Gina Osterloh, "Pillow Talk", Catalog Essay for Ringo Bunoan, Solo Exhibition at Silverlens Gallery, March 2008.

which, as the artist notes provokes “looking at the relationship between pictorial realm and physical realm.”⁽²⁾ In fact, more strongly, the pictorial realm is overwhelmed in the process and the painting is transformed into being first and foremost a material object in the space. In a certain manner, Ng Joon Kiat is also engaged with the painted canvas as a physical object. In a recent series of eight paintings entitled ‘Border Series: the Unspoken and Nature,’ the artist uses the map as the organizing principle around which to build the work. However, overlaying these maps of cities is a heavy acrylic painted surface that partially obscures a close reading of city maps. Details are hidden from view in the same way as city planners imagine the grand city as a whole, forgetting its details, details which represent the average citizen. Visibility is frustrated by the sheer visceral physicality of the surface.

Each of these artworks gains its autonomy that is neither contingent on an external factor nor, at this point, on the artist. The artwork becomes itself, autonomous. It speaks out of itself and to the viewer whose curiosity leads to an engagement. Commentators have often aligned this kind of practice to that of poets and there is a truth to this observation. The economy of words chosen, of building lines and verses. There is no excess here but, a lean economy and with it, a reflexivity. Aware that in its making, its constitution, the poem or artwork will be shown again but, differently. Let me start again. This is wood, paint, cloth, stone, cardboard that each has a certain banal or commonplace character. However, the use of this manifested materiality involves a transformation of pre-existing materials and forms, of shapes and functions. We do not see this process, as described above, so much as experience its outcome. Through this process, we become witness to the poetics of materiality. The work of each of the artists and the artwork they create is about this process of transformation of materials from the mundane to the poetic.

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² Young Rim Lee, unpublished statement, 2013.