

# mā-tər ma-tər

mothermother Iteration 18  
MOTHER MATTER at Silo 6  
20 -28 August 2022  
Open 11am to 4pm

**MELANIE ARNOLD**  
**INGA FILLARY**  
**NATALIE TOZER**  
**ROBYN WALTON**

“Matter matters. And I think it’s really clear in Eva’s work that the material manifestation of the form comes out of an intense investigation of the matter.” - Richard Serra, *Interview for Eva Hesse*.

In May 1970 Eva Hesse’s *Contingent* appeared on the cover of *Artforum* magazine. Sadly it had been the final large work created before her untimely death at the age of 34 that same month. Although the cover propelled her work into the realm of public conversation, the message Hesse delivered was more akin to private, personal experiences which exist outside speech. The suspended, membraneous qualities of *Contingent* carry bodily association without being *of* the body. In a primal departure from tradition, the skeins of latex and fibreglass harnessed the expressive power of raw material - matter brought down to the level of sub-text.

Hesse’s goal was to stay true to the inherent qualities of the materials, to avoid over-manipulating them thereby exposing these unnoticed qualities; making the unseen seen. The intensely physical, uncontrolled nature of her work launched a shift in creative processes which echoed across the art world, she had employed the power of untrammelled matter to experience the self. Hesse’s legacy prevails; despite four distinct approaches, Walton, Tozer, Fillary and Arnold are aware that we owe a debt of gratitude to our foremother Hesse, because for each disparate practice, at the heart of the matter, lies matter.

Each practice seems to me to trash traditional, decorous anthropocentric philosophies of material, each artist’s inquiries pointing to matter’s existence and ‘life’ beyond human utility and meaning. The halo effect of Hesse’s concepts have radiated beyond that of individual experience; for these artists matter points to the environmental burden of consumerism, to the overarching experience of humanity as a whole, or to that which lies beyond the limits of human perception. Like Hesse, Walton, Tozer, Fillary and Arnold employ varying degrees of interference to expose the dark vitality of their matter. This may sound anomalous given the orchestration required by each practitioner in the creation of an artwork - artists spend our time investing objects with meaning. But matter can have agency and reality beyond the sensibility of a human subject.

Melanie Arnold’s latest series, *Diffraction Refinement*, reflects on new materialist theory which employs “diffraction” as a critical and difference-attentive mode of thought. According to physics “diffraction” is a physical phenomenon that occurs when waves encounter an obstacle or opening. Waves bend around the corners of the obstacle, overlapping and extending into one another, just as waves move around the supports of a pier. The interference becomes effectively implicated in the outcome.

New materialist theory regards reading diffractively as a boundary-crossing approach, respectful of different disciplinary practices. Rather than employing a hierarchical methodology placing intellectual traditions, theories or text against one another, diffractively engaging instead requires reading these “through one another” (Barad 30) resulting in creative and unexpected outcomes where even the strongest, most stable and repetitive structures remain vulnerable to interference or further refinement.

*Recurring Remainder*, formally a fence marking the straight boundary between two properties has buckled under the weight of progress, redundant and no longer useful to the capitalist system. Arnold brings outcast objects back into circulation as she recognises potential and freedom in questioning and rethinking conventional notions of value.

Inga Fillary’s recent works represent attempts to operationalise the highly abstract theories found in modern philosophy. Low hierarchy substances, and materials disturbed from their former authority are the cornerstone of Fillary’s practice. When utility is removed, objects are freed to become something other; deeper realities that lie beneath the perceivable surfaces emerge and a material ‘life’ is uncovered. Fillary experiments with the

onslaught of time on material, addressing the burden of humankind upon the earth and the possibility of aesthetic experience to provide an oblique approach to a veiled reality.

*What's the Matter* and *Your Package Has Been Delivered* play with psychic discomfort and damaged and shattered imagery. Each invites the viewer to experience the sensation of instability and explore the materials of a flawed humanity. Each component of the installations offers its own journey, history and vital force. Wrecked, burnt and decaying manufactured materials carry qualities of obsolescence. They are freed from functionality and the empty promises of human technology and instead suggest the possibility of a dark vitality propelling us forward. Humanity is at the edge of a dark, speculative void. Knocked from our pedestal, we no longer represent the peak of evolution but its decline. Fillary's installations laud a species heading for certain doom, the debased euphoria of obliteration. A fleeting gasp of planetary breath and lick to taste the char.

Natalie Tozer's practice also circles the compounded autobiography of materials and questions the validity of reshaping the world in our own image. She presents 4 looped video works in two silos: *Footpath Fossil (breathe)* in which, by collecting, documenting and deciphering the findings of the complex underland beneath our feet, Tozer hopes to gather enough data to learn something. "I like to reach out in the dark, to gaze into a possible future and let the practice reveal the rest".

*every existent in the history of the world is in my room right now* "I want to show through the subject matter and soundtrack that this work subscribes to a subset of 'care'. Deep admiration for my house dust". This perspective and approach is about revealing the alternative strategies against capitalist modes of production, where we focus on tending and caring for what we have, instead of perpetuating in an ever-expanding frenzy.

*Cave Breather* proposes a fictional temporality, modelling our attempts to understand our present by looking back from an imagined future. There may be clues of today found by future civilisations, discovered and dislodged from sedimentary layers, unearthed from the ground and pieced together. Disjointed, corroded by the destructive forces of time, these findings will become new objects that mark our decadent moment in time.

The self-destructing geometric paper structures of *Soothsayer* talk to the ephemeral nature of all human construction. The child places faith in a paper object and constructs a hopeful and naive vision of the future; as humanity has, for so long, assumed its continued good fortune and permanence on earth. Tozer aims to pitch alternative narratives through image worlds and to seek out some of the deepest possibilities and consequences of human construction and destruction.

Defunct-function is the linchpin for Robyn Walton who appropriates mundane material as part of an ongoing concern with the theme of utility – specifically in relation to reproductive labour and maintenance work. Subverting the function of everyday objects upends our understanding of what an 'art' object or a 'utilitarian' object could be. This instability is readily apparent when something is used in an unauthorised way – and becomes the prompt for a different kind of attention. As purpose is confounded associations are expanded beyond the zone of household activity. Material qualities come to the fore.

"Our understanding of use and labour becomes fraught once an object is made desirable. This underlines Robyn's experimentation with found objects, which are often domestic tools, the most purposeful. Through minor and formalistic distortion, she emphasises our relationship to 'function' by rendering it obsolete." (Moya Lawson, for *Bells and Whistles*, 2019.)

Through the reality and agency of matter and the strength of academic thought underpinning each practice, the four artists embrace the consequences of life and non-life, capitalist strategies, function and industry. Like Hesse, the practices are linked by an affinity for the tactile, the tangible, physical qualities of a material reality... *The medium is the message*.

Inga Fillary

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**Barad, Karen.** *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning* Duke University Press, 2007

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## **TRANSITIONAL OBJECTS & THE WORK OF MELANIE ARNOLD**

“I have made the proposition that nowadays we perceive reality primarily in terms of information. As a consequence there is rarely a tangible contact with reality. Reality is robbed of its presence. We no longer perceive its physical vibrations. The layer of information, which covers objects like a membrane, shields the perception of intensities. Perception, reduced to information, numbs us to moods and atmospheres. Rooms lose their poetics.” (Byung-Chul Han)

In Byung-Chul Han’s new reality objects are being displaced by digital nonobjects (*undinge*). Trust in a continuous and stable solid-object must now compete with infomania - with its constant refreshing rush toward the new. Reality is becoming cloudier and lacking in continuity. There is no time to pause for a cup of tea. And anyway, is object-permanence still a thing in an age of cloud computing and tablets for toddlers?

Which got me thinking about transitional objects. The common definition of the transitional object refers to that given to a baby to enable it to self soothe, to transition to a place of separation from the Mother - the first ‘not-me’ object, that operates as mother-substitute.

It strikes me that in the face of infomania, art objects may occupy this role of tangible comfort object. Arnold’s ‘transitional objects’ help me process the object-displacement of a digital existence. Comprised of material stuff overlaid with history in use, they operate between matter and Thing; between functionality and art object; and also, it seems, between solid object and information.

Within her practice Arnold is offering us, the viewer, “Objects as resting places for life” (BCH). Her work acts as a kind of slow food for the eyes and brain. The temporal stability of the tangible takes on the role of contemplative meditative object, both as an interlude from digital sensory overload, and a mindful reengagement with the discarded and obsolete.

As a woman of a certain age, I feel a modicum of affinity with the functionally superseded, and Arnold’s objects call me to care for them. To look, to pay slow attention to all the details, however timeworn. The Latin term *cura-* (to take care of, give attention to, have concern for) gives us the word curation. The curatorial choices Arnold makes in her presentation of found objects, both as regards selection and installation of the relics, are key to our dialogue with the work.

David Joselit’s recent book *Heritage and Debt* discusses three categories of found object appropriation within art practice. Firstly, the readymade operates as an ontological challenge – as both object and idea, it equates the work of art to a fungible commodity. The classic example here is Duchamp, with works such as *Fountain* or *In Advance of the Broken Arm*. The second typology deploys the readymade semantically as a lexical element within a creative ‘text’. The selected component object contributes to decoding the overarching meaning of the work. He uses the example of Robert Rauschenberg’s *Rebus* to illustrate this.

Joselit’s final category, and the one at play here, comprises the cultural dimension where objects are chosen explicitly for their life histories: “Appropriated objects acquire meaning through their histories, which tie them to various forms of heritage. Time marks things in a variety of ways, signalling their age, their function, and the kind of care they receive from users” (Joselit 126).

Here the physical object operates as tangible mnemonic device, taking on the mantle of embodied history. Luke Willis Thompson utilises this to a high degree within his practice. His readymades stand witness to critical historical events. *Untitled*, 2012 (garage doors from Mahia Road) and *Sucu Mate/ Born Dead*, arrive so laden with baggage as to be quite overwhelming. “Works of art that address cultural properties... solicit the marks of time: they seek witnesses to its passage” (Joselit 130).

Arnold’s works generally do not refer to a specific event or history, but rather gesture towards their former life in use. The relics could be seen as artefacts from an earlier time, as archaeological fragments even. Is there perhaps a danger here of deifying the relic? – or of creating a Pompeii-esque spectacle? (Where are the people voids who once used these things?)

I realise this text raises more questions than it provides answers. It seems to me that the works operate primarily as an invitation to the observer to slow down - one that gives their mind permission to wander and wonder. In this instance Arnold does not simply elevate her relics by presenting them within an art world context. The work simultaneously highlights a kind of degradation in structures and institutions – as remnants of a culture which is passing. In a sense, rather than a memorial monument, these artefacts operate as a reference archive.

The end of something does not necessarily imply nostalgia.

“Walter Benjamin’s angel of history is confronted with the catastrophic consequences of human action. In front of him, the heap of debris of history grows towards the sky. But he cannot remove it, because the storm from the future called progress carries him away.” (BCH 51)

Robyn Walton

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**Byung-Chul Han**, interviewed by Gesine Borchardt, trans. Liam Tickner. “I Practice Philosophy as Art.” *Art Review*, December 2021, pp50-53.  
**Joselit, David**. *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization*, The MIT Press, 2020.