

## Critical Materialities (2006)

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Published in: A. Nollert; Irit Rogoff; B. de Baere; Y. Dziewior; C. Esche; K. Nieman and D. Roelstraete, eds. *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y. Revolver*, 2006, 178-186. ISBN 3865883036

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Why and how is it that a particular phenomenon, perhaps previously ignored or apparently inactive or remote<sup>1</sup> — an image, for instance, or some other presentation in or of the world — may suddenly break into a life and effect change? What does it 'know'? What, to cite Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the French phenomenologist and philosopher of embodiment, is its "secret science"?<sup>2</sup> And how do these forms of knowledge relate to our own, and to our own processes and practices of learning and teaching?

### I

#### **Re-thinking Thought**

Recently, leafing through a volume of Byzantine icon paintings,<sup>3</sup> my gaze was drawn in by a late fourteenth-century image of a writer: Saint Mark

the Evangelist. He had been portrayed very simply, from the waist upwards. He was holding a large closed book with one hand and a poised pen in the other. His head was slightly bowed, and his bearing was one of intense concentration. Indeed, the image as a whole had a sense of self-containment, density and removedness. Although it was 'about' communication and communion, it made no direct appeal to me as its viewer and seemed indifferent to my presence. Nonetheless, as I looked, I realised that I had received a wordless answer to a question I had been pondering about my own attitudes to writing (why am I finding it so difficult and how might I start enjoying it again?). I couldn't have *said* what this answer was. Knowledge had been made flesh before being made word. But words, in the form of a brief commentary accompanying the image, soon followed, making it possible to re-approach the image through difference, that is, through the perspectives of another, differently positioned and differently interested viewer of the work. As such, I had a place from which to start reflecting on

the 'something' that had happened in me on the level of the visceral, and to start activating it, consciously and critically. Since learning and teaching in the arts, like art-making itself, are so often poised in the dichotomy between being analytically or theoretically informed on the one hand, and being wordlessly/mythically inspired on the other, this manner of consciously and critically activating that which has been gleaned at another level of perception, becomes exceptionally important in the context of 'Academy'.

Returning to the icon, from my reading it became clear that the answer I had received had been embedded in the specificities of its composition and colour. Key was the way in which the Evangelist's body had been depicted. The relationship between his head and his torso had been somewhat distorted (the neck was significantly broadened), in order to emphasise, pictorially, that for Mark, writing was an activity in which "mind and heart are united in knowledge and prayer".<sup>4</sup> This pre-modern conception of the heart as "the centre of knowledge and motivation" was further reinforced in the image. The Evangelist's dark green cloak created a billowing effect that extended the bodily dimensions of his torso, making it expansive and dynamic. His pen pointed towards this interior space, specifically to the region

of his heart. Simultaneously, it pointed to the book, which could be seen to function, positionally (as well as through its surface design and its red pages), as an externalised, geometric analogue of that heart. Certainly, the legible, symbolic values present in the image had played their part in addressing me, signalling a certain congruence of situation (the fact that a writer was shown, holding the tools/outcomes of his trade). But it was to the painting's inner workings — its critical materialities — that I had found myself unexpectedly apprenticed.

### **Critical materialities?**

The concept of 'critical materialities' makes sense, but only outside of the dualistic/Cartesian understandings of the mind/matter inter-relationship that were introduced in the early modern period and have remained dominant in the west and in western-influenced environments ever since (despite the rise of various so-called postmodernist positions). As such, it has a productively contradictory contribution to make to contemporary debates about what it might mean to think and know, and thus to learn and teach.

As I will try to show, fundamentally at issue is its capacity to generate two different modes of attention. The first is rooted in, and generated by, the singular, internal inter-workings of

phenomena, with these experienced as taking the lead in the production of thought. Sometimes (as in my experience with the St Mark icon) this kind of contact is unexpected and apparently unbidden, and might be described as a directedness that is derived from things or phenomena to viewers.

Often, however, the phenomenal self-showing at issue is in long-exposure mode and a capacity to connect with it must be cultivated. Since this self-showing frequently operates on pre-linguistic registers, this requires, on our part, that certain long-play activities not generally associated with intellectual or critical work, and often identified as 'representational' or 'mimetic', are brought into play. I am thinking of such activities of attunement as description and transcription, for instance. In Merleau-Pontean terms, forms of bodily knowledge or knowledge-through-contact are at issue here. Interestingly, such intercorporeal conceptions of knowledge have been elaborated more recently, both by the Italian political theorist Giorgio Agamben, and by the American/American-based theorists Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, with particular reference to experiences of rubbing and being rubbed. (I will return to this theme later.) The outcome of all of these

experiences and activities is an expanded conception of where and how thought is located, and how it circulates. Certainly it is not experienced as rooted in an autonomous Cartesian/humanist cogito or 'I think'.

The second mode of attention contrasts with the first, but exists alongside it. It involves becoming radically conscious of one's own concrete relationships to other people, things, information and ideas and it takes this awareness as a starting-point for further thought, research and action. But it does so in a way that, once again, works against an autonomous sense of self/thought. When it comes to the communication of knowledge or expertise ('teaching'), this is likewise situated, perspectival and relational. A given territory is entered into in a singularised way, not in order to produce some new orthodoxy, but to create positions of difference from which others may develop their own equally situated (counter)-explorations and (counter)-positions.

## A Pedagogical Challenge



Between December 2005 and January 2006, the installation *Kiosk: 'Modes of Multiplication' & 'Liam Gillick: Edgar Schmitz'* was on show at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London. *Kiosk* was/is a travelling archive of artists books, periodicals, alternative magazines, self-publication projects and audio and video work, curated differently and by different individuals in each location of display. *Liam Gillick: Edgar Schmitz* was the title given to the way in which Gillick, with fellow artist and theorist, Schmitz, curated the contents of *Kiosk* at the ICA. My interest in this installation is that it provides a rich contemporary context for discussing the pedagogical implications of 'critical materialities'. This is because it enacts and opens up for scrutiny a specific pedagogical challenge that now characterises a wide variety of communicative contexts.

This challenge is activated by the overlap of two scenarios. One concerns the increasingly democratised, technologised, and thus accelerated conditions of information production and circulation, certainly within economically developed regions of the world — the proliferation of 'stuff' that must somehow be navigated. The other is a broadly 'non-representationalist' orientation towards information/communication. This orientation has a fairly long history from a theoretical standpoint,<sup>5</sup> but is becoming ever more recurrent in everyday educational contexts ranging from the sales promotion to the television documentary, gallery display and university seminar room. A tendency here is to emphasise the 'production of new meanings' through speculative and often uncontextualised explorations of the information/image-world, which is itself conceptualised as an archive of fragmentary phenomena to be sampled, arranged and rearranged. This overall state of affairs leads to pedagogical situations marked by degrees of evasiveness, elusiveness, opacity or muteness. A weakness of this orientation is that the provision of 'background' information is often equated with practices of imposition. But a strength is its openness and the way in which it calls into question the traditional pedagogical value placed on what

Merleau-Ponty called the "school-master's question" — the question that is "asked of someone who doesn't know by someone who knows".<sup>6</sup>

In the ICA show, this doubled scenario was enacted through the device of offering (or appearing to offer) its visitors at once 'too much' and 'too little'. 'Too little' was offered because rather than "examine how publishers and editors, as well as artists, work within the context and constraints of printed and recorded material" as claimed, the show merely presented the uncontextualised outcomes of those activities. As such (certainly at first glance) it provided visitors with insufficient conceptual resources with which to approach the materials on display. This sense of paucity was intensified by the purposefully non-contextualised inclusion of other elements that (on the level of content) seemed to be only randomly connected to the show as a whole. One of these was a painting located near the entrance, "a new work by Christopher Wool, made in collaboration with Josh Smith" which, according to the exhibition literature, was intended to "act as a mute sign and announcement" of the broader curatorial strategies organising the show. The other was a short film loop derived from Fassbinder's 1979 film *The Third Generation*, and projected

on the back wall (Schmitz's contribution to the show). This loop gave no real indication of the film's overall theme — although it did communicate a sense of intrigue and suspense. Instead (and interestingly), it was described for visitors only in terms of its formal and functional effects, as "play[ing] continually in the space, providing extra light to read by and an activated moment within the space".<sup>7</sup>

The exhibition also offered 'too much'. No only were hundreds of publications on display, they were strewn, again apparently randomly, on and against the horizontals and verticals of the red, grid-like display structures that Gillick had designed for the show. Since they were laid out as if with the purpose of being picked up, flicked through, even read, the visitor was immediately faced with the problem of feeling both required and unable to engage appropriately with/do justice to what was being offered.

### **The Personalisation Minefield**

Given the real possibility that some visitors would feel unable to engage with the show beyond the level of the purely superficial, the ICA did in fact proffer a strategy for navigating it. During my visits, it was modelled by the attendant who, regularly, and with apparent casualness, would leave his

post and approach the work. He would handle it, move it around, and even sit down on or amongst it, demonstrating that Gillick's surfaces also functioned as seating and that the archive on display was intended for use. In other words, an active and individual route through was authorised, but through *deed* rather than word. Thus, visitors were expected to utilise the space in a variety of ways, as they liked: to browse or become absorbed, to stay for a while or all day. The relatively disorderly nature of the scene also made it possible for certain visitors (i.e. those involved in self-publishing) to incorporate into the collection, surreptitiously or overtly, examples of their own work in the hope that these would travel as part of the *Kiosk* show to its next destination.

Clearly, these personalised and participatory ways of engaging with the (apparently) relatively unregulated display of materials in the exhibition, were intended to create an atmosphere of openness and generosity. Certainly, they had the potential to encourage independence of thought and individual agency. Clearly too, and despite the fact that many of the behaviours activated by the exhibition (rummaging, reading, scanning, etc) tended towards the solitary rather than the collective, the curatorial project itself was conceived

from the first as collaborative and 'relational'.<sup>8</sup> Similarly orientated approaches, combined with practices of analysis and evaluation, characterise my own approach to curriculum design and teaching and that of the department in which I work. Nonetheless, personal and participatory forms of engagement are not sufficient in themselves to enable genuine shifts in understanding. Indeed, in some instances they may actively preclude such learning from taking place.

This is because in reality, and unless carefully nurtured to the contrary, personalised and participatory behaviours may function as just another manifestation of the contemporary drive to consume, with new information and experiences evaluated purely in terms of individual preference and/or merely assimilated into habitual frames of reference. (Indeed, upon reflection, the layout of *Kiosk* evoked the commercial space of a bookshop as much as it did a library or reading room.) This observation leads to another, namely, that although various forms of personalisation are becoming increasingly strategic within art-making, curatorial and educational contexts, they already have a long and complex history of application in the worlds of commerce and marketing. I

am not suggesting that this connection between personalised cultural/pedagogical and personalised commercial practices somehow diminishes the former. Instead, my point is firstly that personalised and participatory practices should not be idealised in and of themselves.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, it is that learning is not fundamentally a matter of consolidating already-embedded patterns of thought, but of questioning and possibly departing from them. However, situations characterised by certain kinds of informational or contextual lack, or in which there is inadequate critical provocation, can result in participants being forced to draw solely upon their own, already existent resources. Thus, what may emerge in and through permissive forms of cultural engagement is an unchallenged proliferation of attitudes that, in the final analysis, are autonomous and self-referential as well as 'imperialistic'.

As it turns out, such a state of affairs was both historicised and critiqued almost seventy years ago by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. In his 1938 essay 'The Age of the World Picture' he defined what he called the "five essential phenomena of the modern age", identifying art "under the purview of aesthetics" as one of them.

Accompanying these 'essential phenomena', he insisted, was a new conception of mankind in which "man becomes the primary and only real *subjectum*... the relational centre of that which is as such."<sup>10</sup> Where art was concerned, he argued, a condition emerged in which "... the art work becomes the object of mere subjective experience, and ... consequentially art is considered to be the expression of human life".<sup>11</sup>

An analogous but not identical diagnosis has been made more recently by the Italian political theorist Giorgio Agamben in the opening chapter of his book, *The Man Without Content* (1994). In this chapter, entitled 'The Most Uncanny Thing', he too problematises the rise of 'aesthetics', associating it with a process "through which the spectator insinuates himself into the concept of 'art'."<sup>12</sup> The ultimate effect of this process, he claims, is that it robs art of its agency (specifically its capacity to invoke terror), thus domesticating it. In his view, therefore:

Perhaps nothing is more urgent — if we really want to engage the problem of art in our time — than a *destruction* of aesthetics that would... allow us to bring into question the very

meaning of aesthetics as the science of the work of art. The question, however, is whether the time is ripe for such a *destruction*, or whether instead the consequence of such an act would not be the loss of any possible horizon for the understanding of the work of art and the creation of an abyss in front of it that could only be crossed with a radical leap.<sup>13</sup>

## II

### Embedded

I'd really like to think that the artist could be just another kind of material in the picture working in collaboration with all the other materials. But of course I know this isn't possible really. (Robert Rauschenberg)<sup>14</sup>

In 'The Most Uncanny Thing', Agamben, following Nietzsche, attempts to counter the problem of the work of art's loss of agency by drawing attention away from conditions of viewing and back onto those of making. He writes in terms of "filtering the... sensory involvement of the spectator [in order to] consider art from the point of view of its creator".<sup>15</sup> But

an alternative way forward may be proposed, via the notion of critical materialities, in which issues of reception (including personalised and participatory forms of reception) are not negated or neglected due to their actual or perceived dangers, but precisely taken up and taken elsewhere.

This 'taking up' and 'taking elsewhere' consists of a concretisation and contextualisation of the personal that accords with patterns found in Merleau-Ponty's explorations of embodied subjectivity. On the one hand, it starts with the affirmation that, phenomenologically, one of the important ways in which we experience ourselves *is* at the centre of things. But this centredness, when it is lived, is experienced as having certain restrictions at the same time that it has a 'unifying' effect: "...the life of consciousness," he writes, " — cognitive life, the life of desire or perceptual life — is subtended [i.e. enclosed, surrounded, delimited] by an 'intentional arc' which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects... It is this intentional arc which brings about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, sensibility and motility."<sup>16</sup>

As indicated, then, to be centred is also to be embedded in sets of (often mutating) intersubjective, social, historical and ethical structures. As such it is an inevitably heterogeneous and indeterminate phenomenon, relational and entangled, open to disruption, even discord. This brings me to my second point. From this perspective, attending to the personal and personalised aspects of our lives means also becoming conscious of the actuality and singularity of other people, things, situations and information-flows. When these others also become points of focus, questions inevitably arise concerning the specificities of who we are, and how we are, in terms of our interconnections with and effects on others. And vice versa — for, in Merleau-Ponty's words, "Once we are aware of the existence of others we commit ourselves to being, among other things, what they think of us..."<sup>17</sup> From a 'critical materialities' position, it is from this unstable place of entanglement and difference that new forms of thought and action emerge. Indeed, this was a principal claim made by Merleau-Ponty in his major work, the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945):

The first philosophical act would appear to be to

return to the world of actual experience which is prior to the objective world, since it is in it that we shall be able to grasp the theoretical basis no less than the limits of that objective world, restore to things their concrete physiognomy, to organisms their individual ways of dealing with the world, and to subjectivity its inherence in history. Our task will be, moreover, to rediscover phenomena, the layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given to us, the system 'Self-others-things' as it comes into being; to re-awaken perception and foil its trick of allowing us to forget it as a fact and as perception in the interest of the object which it presents to us and of the rational tradition to which it gives rise.<sup>18</sup>

However, the capacity to take up personalised ways of being in this complex, other(ness)-orientated way is something that must be learned and practised. What are required are environments for learning in which it

becomes possible to take a productive detour from autonomy by scrutinising the divergent ways in which the world operates as world and the self as self, and in which searches for appropriate forms of responsiveness are activated (individual, collective, cultural, political). A vital element, here, can be the inclusion of that 'background' information, referred to earlier, about the often-conflicting perceptions, even prejudices, experiences, analyses and questions that others have raised in relation to a given issue, or work, or body of knowledge, past and present. But only, I think, if this information is proffered not in the form of readymade formulae or facts, but in order to immerse us in difference.

The ICA show actively withheld this kind of information. Therefore, whether it was able to make *this* kind of learning in-and-through-difference possible is an open question. Particularly in question is whether it provided sufficiently concrete, singularised provocations through which to divert its participants (those already well-informed in the histories and theories of contemporary art practices and strategies as much as those less well schooled) from certain well-trodden interpretative paths. I wonder, for instance, what new and challenging associations would have opened up had participants been given

the opportunity to read the exhibition and its strategies of display through the knowledge (the 'conceptual' light) that the Fassbinder film from which Schmitz derived his film-loop was a 1970s satirical meditation on terrorism? On the other hand, though, a deeply situated, inter-relational sensibility was indicated in other, less immediately obvious ways – through the decision to name the exhibition after one of the individuals who had been central to its curation, for instance.

### **Thick Thought**

I remain interested in art as a carrier of refusal. Art can embody inarticulate pleas for viewing the world in a different order. (Liam Gillick)<sup>19</sup>

By his proposal to re-prioritise the maker over the viewer within the field of art, Agamben intends a shift of focus from "the [Kantian] disinterested spectator to the interested artist."<sup>20</sup> What concerns him here is "the idea that extreme risk is implicit in the artist's activity"<sup>21</sup> and that this sense of risk should also attend the viewing of art, individually and collectively. However, an outcome of Agamben's reversal is that the agency of the work of art itself is occluded insofar as it may be experienced as

resisting/disregarding the intentions, projections, passions and interpretations of both maker and viewer. Again, the notion of critical materialities offers an alternative. For it is so configured that it involves embracing precisely the phenomenal world's resistant registers. It does so by engaging with the opacity and muteness of matter. This opacity and muteness is not regarded as an absence or 'abyss' or as a problem to be overcome but in the words of Jean-Luc Nancy, as a "non-communication of meaning or non-delivery of a message."<sup>22</sup>



One of the effects of materiality's muteness, when experienced as a resistant force, is that in the face of it we too become mute. Merleau-Ponty describes this as a state of being in which "the watchwords of knowledge and action lose their meaning and force."<sup>23</sup> But with this loss of speech and, more pointedly, of judgement (as well as of other acts that are normally

associated with intellectual or critical work), alternate forms of attention, relating, and thus knowing, come into focus.

From a phenomenological perspective, it is a form of knowing that has as its basis the (always incomplete) self-showing of the phenomenon or the thing itself, from out of itself, that is, on its terms, not ours. This is a position that is often associated with a pre-modern sensibility, a topic on which Umberto Eco has written in his *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (1988). Reflecting on the differences between pre-modern and modern understandings of knowledge (in this case, knowledge of the beautiful), he compares a notion of beauty as "objectively present in things without the help or hindrance of man" with an alternate "kind of objectivism [which] considers beauty to be a transcendental property also, but a property which is disclosed in relation to a knowing subject." The latter he connects with "a substantial move in the direction of humanism."<sup>24</sup> Where this issue of non-human-centred self-showing is concerned, Merleau-Ponty's reflections on, and affection for Cézanne's paintings are also apt. For one of the factors of interest to him was the power of these paintings to immerse viewers in what he called pre-personal or 'anonymous' modes of

being: “[n]ature itself is stripped of the attributes which make it ready for animistic communions,” he wrote in ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’, “there is no wind in the landscape, no movement on the Lac d’Annecy; the frozen objects hesitate at the beginning of the world. It is an unfamiliar world in which one is uncomfortable and which forbids all human effusiveness.”<sup>25</sup> Early on in the essay he referred to the “inhuman” character of Cézanne’s works and to the painter’s comment that “a face should be painted as an object.”<sup>26</sup> Here, then, the world does not present itself as being for-us. Rather, a position is opened up that is inimical to the subject-centred intellectual and aesthetic sensibilities of humanism.

As already indicated, in this regard critical materialities refers to knowledges that are rooted in pre-linguistic, pre-rational and pre-objective bodily logics, correspondences and exchanges. These knowledges via contact must also be learned, however, specifically through such other(ness)-directed practices of being present, attending and waiting. Interestingly, in his essay ‘The Thing Itself’ (published in 1984 in the volume *Potentialities*), Agamben provides these apparently non-intellectualist practices with a Platonic provenance. Citing a little-known text known as Plato’s ‘Seventh Letter’, in

which the topic of ‘the thing itself’ [*to pragma auto*] is the point of focus, he quotes Plato as follows:

There does not exist, not will there ever exist, any treatise of mine dealing with this thing. For it does not at all admit of verbal expression like other disciplines [*mathēmata*], but after one has dwelt for a long time close to the thing itself [*peri to pragma auto*], and in communion with it, it is suddenly brought to birth in the soul, as light that is kindled by a leaping spark; and then it nourishes itself [*auto heauto ēdē trefei*]” ... the knowledge of the thing itself suddenly emerges in ‘rubbing together names, definitions, visions and sense perceptions, proving them in benevolent proofs and discussions without envy’.<sup>27</sup>

As Kaja Silverman has pointed out in her book *World Spectators* (2000), a theme of knowledge through contact in which phenomena/experiences of ‘rubbing’ are central, recurs in Leo Bersani’s writing also, specifically his writing about the ways in which it is

precisely in situations of the most profound 'corporeal convergence', as in erotic encounters, that profound encounters with difference are also able to emerge. Referencing Bersani's book *Homos* (1995) and admitting, incidentally, that she is using his ideas somewhat outside of their original context, she writes that "the subject is at such moments 'so obscenely "rubbed" by the object it anticipates mastering that the very boundaries separating subject from object, boundaries necessary for possession [are] erased'." She continues:

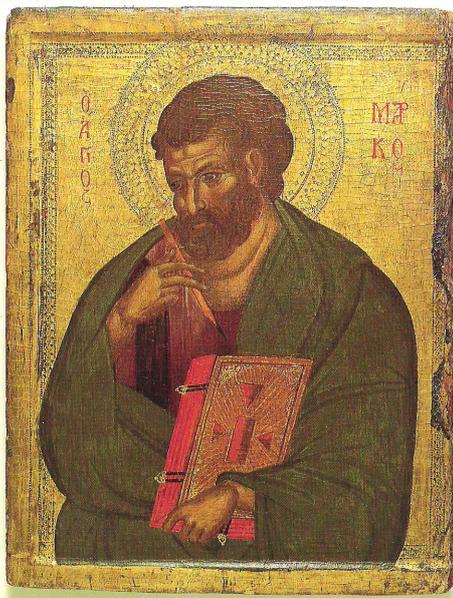
The dissolution of identity about which Bersani writes... is no more lasting than the erotic encounter through which it is effected. However, when one body moves away from another, it leaves behind what might be called the 'traces of difference.' When the now solitary subject attempts to reconstitute itself, these traces of difference stick in the gears of the egoic machinery. The result is an inaccurate self-replication. In *Arts of Impoverishment* (1993), Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit dream of setting in motion an infinite series of these inaccurate self-

replications. In *Homos*, Bersani intimates that inaccurate self-replication might also lead to an appetite for alterity, and so to a different relation to other creatures and things.<sup>28</sup>

If I may refer again to the ICA installation, on a phenomenal level it was precisely the possibility of these hard-to-articulate knowledges-through-contact that it was in the process of opening up. In other words, when considered in terms of what it was presenting rather than what it had withheld, the installation was, I think, gesturing primarily towards corporeal acts of dwelling in/'rubbing up against' its own textures and rhythms. My own corporeal route through the installation, for instance, was one in which the show's abstract, compositional and coloristic qualities took the lead. Nonetheless, I would have liked the challenge of an more resistant, recalcitrant environment. For, initially at least, I found that I had reverted to type, navigating according to my own aesthetic inclinations. But it is also true that it was through my attention to these issues of form and facture that I was led to think about this show in relation, and in comparison, to certain other, not dissimilarly composed installations that

Gillick has constructed over the years (i.e. *Consultation Partition*, 2000 or *Local Discussion Screen*, 2001-02) and to the particularised questions and interactions that they continue to provoke.

### III



The movement of critical materialities as described here has been a movement in two contradictory but over-lapping directions, towards the radically and concretely personal and located, and towards the radically decentered and anonymous. Where both of them end up, however, is immersed in difference. These movements seem important since cumulatively they produce attitudes that run counter to the acquisitiveness that is generally operative in culture and increasingly in the worlds of learning. The question that activates

me now concerns how best to enable these flows to be enacted in the specific, contemporary educational contexts with which I am involved. My suspicion is that, as with the ICA show as I have described it, it will probably involve attempting but never managing to balance acts of proffering and withholding. But I write this in a positive spirit because at issue is not finding a foolproof methodology. It is, above all, a question of individual locatedness and singularised questings in the midst of many other, similarly unstable materialised positionings and self-showings, with the aim of provoking thought and interaction. Having said that, however, there are some precedents for this doubled approach to be found in the personalised yet collaborative exploratory practices characteristic of such early-mid twentieth-century art institutions as the Bauhaus in Dessau (Germany) and Black Mountain College in North Carolina (USA). I am thinking particularly of the work of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, Johannes Itten, and Josef and Anni Albers. Of particular relevance, from my perspective, are the relationships that emerged between the pedagogical intentions of these practitioners on the one hand and their art-making and teaching practices on the other. Take the Albers. On the one hand there was Josef Albers' learner-centred claim

that "[t]he pupil and his [or her] growing into the world are more important than the teacher and his [or her] background."<sup>29</sup> On the other hand there was his art-making/teaching practice that seemed in many ways to be directed towards the pre-personal, rooted as it was in abstraction and focused on the communicative possibilities inherent to the material, textural, compositional and perceptual qualities of things. I am not alone in my interest in these practices of

course. Note the recent exhibitions 'Starting at Zero: Black Mountain College 1933-57' at the Arnolfini in Bristol and Kettle's Yard, Cambridge and 'Albers and Moholy-Nagy: From the Bauhaus to the New World' at Tate Modern during 2006. Both of these exhibitions had an historical, retrospective emphasis. But I would like to think about how I might 'transcribe' the material knowledges enacted by those artist-educationalists into present and future scenarios.

Notes on images:

1. Cornelia Parker, *Embryo Firearms*, 1995, Colt 45 guns in the earliest stage of production, 19 x 13 x 2.4 cm. (Source: <http://www.contempart.org.uk/giveandtake/recentpurchases/fineart/parker.htm> )
2. Installation shot of *Kiosk: 'Modes of Multiplication' & 'Liam Gillick: Edgar Schmitz'*, Institute of Contemporary Art in London (Dec 2005- Jan 2006).
3. Maria von Koehler, *Crash Barrier*, 2002, 2.1 x 6.5 m (Source: <http://www.n16mag.com/issue14/p24i14.htm> )
4. *St Mark*, Byzantine, from Cyprus, late 14<sup>th</sup> c. (Source: John Baggley *Doors of Perception — icons and their spiritual significance*, London and Oxford, Mowbray, 1987, p. 115).

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<sup>1</sup> It was through viewing (at the Serpentine Gallery, London, in 1995) the work shown here, Cornelia Parker, *Embryo Firearms*, 1995, Colt 45 guns in the earliest stage of production, 19 x 13 x 2.4 cm, that the conception of critical materialities (or material thought) first began to present itself to me.

<sup>2</sup> The actual context of Merleau-Ponty's words are as follows: "What, then, is this secret science which [the painter] has or which he seeks? That dimension which lets Van Gogh say he must go 'further on'? What is this fundamental of painting, perhaps

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of all culture?" Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind', *The Primacy of Perception*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 161.

<sup>3</sup> John Baggley, *Doors of Perception — icons and their spiritual significance*, London and Oxford, Mowbray, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>5</sup> It draws in part on Freudian/psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious and of unconscious drives, and on the Barthian notion of 'the death of the author'. It also draws on calls, derived mainly from post-60s philosophical discourse, to abandon recourse to 'hegemonic' meta-narratives and 'reductive' explanatory or foundational structures in order to make sense of things. More recently, theories of performativity have also had their part to play.

<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, p. 167.

<sup>7</sup> The literature accompanying the show is duplicated on the ICA's website at [www.ica.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=14535](http://www.ica.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=14535) (accessed 29 June 2006).

<sup>8</sup> See Nicolas Bourriaud on this topic in *Relational Aesthetics*, Les presses du réel, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> For a perspective on this matter as it relates to relational aesthetics see Clare Bishop's critique of Bourriaud in 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October* 110, Fall 2004, pp. 51 – 79.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture' [1938], *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, W. Lovitt (trans.), Harper and Row, 1977, pp. 115 – 136, p. 128.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 116.

<sup>12</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, p 5.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 6

<sup>14</sup> Referenced in Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: The Heretical Courtship in Modern Art*, New York, Viking Press; London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965, p 232.

<sup>15</sup> Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1962, p. 136.

<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 'Metaphysics and the Novel', *Sense and Non-Sense*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 57.

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<sup>19</sup> Alicia Miller, 'Materialised Expression: The sculpture of Liam Gillick', *Sculpture*, January/February 2004, pp. 43-47 (p. 47).

<sup>20</sup> Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> I am referencing fragments from Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Weight of a Thought', *The Gravity of Thought* [1993], Humanity Books, 1997, pp 75 – 84 (p. 80).

<sup>23</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind', *The Primacy of Perception*, 161.

<sup>24</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, London, Radius, 1988, p. 89.

<sup>25</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt', *Sense and Non-Sense*, p. 16

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, pp. 11 and 12.

<sup>27</sup> Agamben, 'The Thing Itself' [1984], *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1999, pp 27 – 38 (pp 28 – 29, 30).

<sup>28</sup> Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, p. 142.

<sup>29</sup> Josef Albers, 'Art as Experience', *Progressive Education*, October 1935, n.p.