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Borrowed Idols

Strategies for choosing materials in contemporary fine arts

Abstract

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Artists of the modern era may often seem to play freely when creating, since their hands and mind are not bound by such strict regulations, community rules and laws in his self-expressive activity as those of their predecessors. And yet they are coordinated by such atavistic intuitions thanks to their subconscious sources that make them similar to their ancestors. The stakes of their play are high because artists expressing their own identities and worldviews today manifest themselves as extremely individualized members of an extremely atomized society. Therefore, they encounter the group functions of traditional communities in their own existential experiences limited by their individuality, and thus they seek spiritual experiences mostly within their own individual possibilities and goals. In this context, artists of individualistic societies build private mythologies as one-person communities nowadays, thus creating an abstract representation of their own universes allowing for active participation in the cultural multiverse of our time and for connecting to the greater whole beyond him, that is, to the transcendent. Interpreting the sacred attitude of fine arts in this approach is one of the directions I follow in my DLA thesis. However, I think that deciding on the choice of material and its processing strategies is an important basic task for every contemporary artist, since the common language of the multiverse of our fine arts is largely built up from messages encoded in the material.

In chapters of the DLA thesis, I aim at clarifying these propositions from various perspectives and with various methods. In addition to trying to unravel the semantic layers of my own works by exploring my intentions in choosing and processing materials, I also research similar creative attitudes on the impenetrably wide palette of contemporary fine arts. To establish the background, I feel it necessary to touch on the historical development of the tools of fine arts in relation to the choice of materials, and to analyse the changed ideological background of the creative practice through some selected examples that I found typical.

During the DLA training period, I focused primarily on workshop work, the practical experiences of which, together with their subsequent interpretations, almost automatically outlined the directions along which I wished to streamline the topic.

Accordingly, I highly rely on the results of my individual and group exhibitions, on my own texts and the curators' texts, and on the end-of-semester doctoral reports in which I recorded my findings, as regards both the structure and the content of my work.

I study the intermediary role of the material and the profane and sacred nature of the medium, with a strong focus on the anthropological roots of creative behavior. In the works analysed, including my own ones, I interpret the aesthetic and art history-related conflict arising from the use of materials as a matrix with a code system of form-material-message. I compare the message of the idea embodied in the material to messages inherent in the carrier material. I

study confrontational situations arising from material choices and from the pairing of certain materials and/or objects, by unraveling which I aim at showing those complex and often contradictory situations which, as I claim, provide important contemporary semantic layers of the works I examine, since the “worldview energies” of a given zeitgeist are condensed into such contrasts, sometimes regardless of the conscious actual will of the creator.

The liberation history of the material use of fine arts

In my dissertation, I interpret the forms of expression of art as a cultural symptom complex according to the human ethological perspectives of Vilmos Csányi. I study artworks as the imprint of the evolutionary origin of the formation of cultures and of the resulting cognitive phenomena expressed and materialised in sacred experiences. So it is mainly this perspective that I primarily apply to approach the democratisation processes of the use of materials in fine arts from. In this way, I arrive at a seemingly endless variety of materials used today from materials selected to convey a sacred message.

Today, artists can choose from many options for material processing in addition to previously canonised procedures of high art. They can apply the tradition-based craftsmanship of folk crafts, use innovative technical tools, use DIY home solutions, follow the attentive approach of small-series manufacturing industry, the precision of large-scale industrial processes or even the stage-setting approach of decorative processes. And they can do so in an almost infinite spectrum of materials, from stone and bronze through PUR foam to the bottling of exhaled air. Since such choices all carry messages related to the choice of values, they unavoidably have a demonstrative function. This value choice can have a particularly great significance now when almost every aspect of our lives is affected by overproduction. According to Nicolas Bourriaud, who created the concept of relational aesthetics, *napjaink művészei számára* meet the issue of overproduction as an organic part of the cultural ecosystem. This encourages further paradigm shifts, not only by strongly thematising the possibilities of art, but also by influencing them, being a form-forming factor. On the global arena of art, it is the ancient human instinct to process materials, create objects and enjoy objects to have remained as one of the common denominators.

Material and form as media in contemporary fine arts

The medium of fine arts exerts its effect by drawing on two sources. On the one hand, it is its perceptibility being an organic part of the conveyed image, and its perceptibility arising from

its own materiality, on the other. The choice of medium might be such an important issue just because we associate familiar materials once canonized by forms with the archaic forms of collective consciousness that have become our internal images according to our cultural reflexes. If a mass of associations flows into these images being information independent of the images from another medium being an independent entity, and therefore carrying its own memory, then this might create a confrontational, discomfoting or revelatory connection that may dynamise the recipient's experience as a source of catharsis. If we discuss the mechanism of the creation and reception of art being "of fundamental importance from an anthropological point of view" within the framework of Belting's body-image-medium relationship, and compare this to Pavel Florensky's iconostasis theory, we would come upon very exciting parallels. Even the expressive intentions of extremely individualised private mythologies aim unconsciously at asserting themselves from a universally transcendent sphere, which is independent of religious affiliation, from which the Orthodox canon of the icon also draws. It certainly happens in the form of rituals that shape the material, if not otherwise, where the task – and thus the law – is given by the individual who wishes to transcend his own subjectivity, and the implementing hand is provided by craftsmanship following its own path.

Material as a self-assertive medium

Presenting Walter De Maria's *New York Earth Room*, I look for a starting point that, due to the complete absence of the depicted story, can represent the beginning of the path to be outlined. Material freed from the compulsion to tell a story and stepping out of the shadow of form shall not only carry a message as a medium, but can also represent itself. That is, in many cases, the lack of the compulsion to depict encourages the artist to present the material he uses for itself, in its own reality. However, even a material that seems natural, timeless, and independent of man and culture is filled with images that cannot be separated from it at the moment it is placed in the position of an artwork. Drawing from examples and counterexamples, I am outlining a perspective from which artists working with materials and objects of various quantities and qualities play with the role of the medium as a carrier of information in a wide spectrum. In other words: messages arising from the ideas displayed or conveyed by the medium and the own physical and cultural role of the medium's material itself are shared following very different logics and to very different proportions. In my view, an important aspect and even the genre character of a certain creative attitude is often determined by the relative proportion of these two types of messages.

Transubstantiated material: magic, pathos, humour and irony in the context of material

Perhaps art would not have been born if the animistic world interpretation of man had not created such a deep physical and spiritual kinship between man and all living creatures and non-living things. This magical thinking is presupposed by the transsubstantial character of matter. I believe that the traditional use of materials, techniques and themes may go on functioning as a valid creative attitude today if the artist manages to capture the ancient, archaic experience of transsubstantializing the material, or if he can counterpoint its pathos with humour and irony. I pick out some examples from a wide range of possible solutions, from relative time experience manifested in stone and bronze, through the erotic and tragic radiance of a hairy horsehide and the suffering angelic character of wax, to motorised wayang puppets or PUR foam capable of expressing both the beauty ideal of classicism and shameless obscenity, up to a point where even a simple piece of decaying banana might characterize complex economic, social and sociocultural systems.

Memory reconsidered and archaisms encoded into material

In this chapter, I use some examples to show the variety of ways archaic instincts can come to the surface, both in terms of the medium and the myths expressed, and the importance of a well-chosen story (image, context) whose task is to highlight special properties of the material thus ensuring that it can evoke the cultural formations of memory inherent in the chosen material through adequate association channels.

I am concerned with the question of whether a material, as a medium having properties independent of cultures, too, can be a common denominator, that is, a source of messages to be decoded similarly by everyone. Can the spiritual experiences and self-expressive gestures of individuals losing ground in the absence of their traditional communities be in a common set with the manifestations of archaic, classical (that is, accessible through art history) cultures, and folk/tribal cultures? It is certainly worth keeping in mind the possibility of false connections induced by analogies and projections arising from our cultural habits during the comparative evaluation of works of art created for various purposes. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to give up fruitful misunderstandings as our possible important creative resources, either in the creative process or in the decoding of a work of art. Not only do they keep alive the fundamental nature of the creative message, that is, its hidden essence, but they also have a mutually fertilising power, reminding us of our common anthropological roots.

“Operational chain” as a sacred ritual

Our common anthropological roots also give rise to the well-depictable ritual of material processing which can be characterized by the concept of the *operational chain* as introduced by André Leroi-Gourhan. I find the idea particularly exciting that the operational chain as a material processing activity might have led our species to developing causality in thinking and the concept of time in prehistoric times, thus becoming the cradle of object-making civilisation and culture. Latest archaeological findings and study procedures using modern research technologies prove that Leroi-Gourhan’s paradigm-shift approach proved to be correct. The development theory dictated by modernist arrogance which assumes a linear series of *development* from prehistoric “primitive” art to the results described in art history has become obsolete by now.

Using the approach applied to fine arts by Georges Didi-Huberman, I interpret the concept of the operational chain as a civilisational formation and a characteristic form of manifestation of the human race. Its operational mechanism goes beyond a mere algorithm of the technological sequence, whether we deal with the issue from the perspective of the creator or of the recipient. It includes such culture-creating methods as tradition and innovation, community and individual, material as a medium and form as the currently functional message of civilisation. It can take us back as far as 300 to 400 thousand years, bridging flintstone snapping procedures of Neanderthal men as developed and perfected over tens of thousands of years, the engineering and work organisation paradoxes of the Egyptian pyramids or the sacred layering of Orthodox icons and individual artists experimenting with self-imposed technological recipes of the 21st century.

From anthropology to evolutionary and cognitive culture science

I try to illustrate the working mechanism of the story as an archaic prototype in the light of the choice of material, through the example of an iconic land art work, the *Spiral Yetty*. I study what cultural and, ultimately, biological and anthropological factors may determine the attitude of the creator and of the recipient to the work of art. Such cognitive phenomena may fundamentally determine our mystical attraction towards objects, materials and the symbols manifested in them.

In the 21st century, archaeology supported by genetics, human ethology, neurosciences, and evolutionary-cognitive cultural science, as emerging from the cooperation of evolutionary biology and psychology, began to develop extremely rapidly. Thanks to these, cognitive

properties that are generally valid for all members of the human race are revealed, helping us to understand the closely interconnected biological and cultural evolution of our species. According to my suspicion, the power of linguistic and material memory to create cultural continuity stems from the same root, which is also supported by Csányi's claims. In the globalizing 20th and 21st centuries, these instinctive driving forces could/can also gain fundamental significance in the development of material-centered forms of self-expression in the fine arts, too, taking into account the wear and tear of local cultural brakes and thus the consequent emergence of universal characteristics of the human race.

Art as communication by one-person communities

Instinctively, I feel that the individual as a one-person community may be the key to understanding quite a few aesthetic phenomena that we can encounter at contemporary art events. For some time now, galleries have placed contemporary artworks in a dialogue position with earlier works and even monuments of art history, and it is increasingly common the other way round, too. There are also many other combinations of creating a context, see for example tribal arts or folk art placed in a partner position with contemporary artworks. Ecologically conscious approaches to fine arts also produced formal solutions reminding us of scientific laboratory practices. There is an increasingly widespread attitude where informative textual information, videos, and other illustrative means appear alongside with contemporary artworks as equally important elements of the total impression. Intermediary tools that previously functioned as museum dissemination media only have become an integral part of the installations by now, often providing the backbone of the aesthetic message, that is, the verbalised explanatory narrative is directly included in the toolbox of self-expression. I think that this way the functions of the gallery, the museum, the theatre, the opera, scientific research institutes or social institutions, and even the disco are intertwined in such a way that quite often the defining intermediary element and the primary message is interdisciplinarity itself. This approach entails that the basic principles guiding formation which have an important role in the considerations related to the selection of the authentic material may also be relaxed since various areas of culture communicate their thoughts according to completely different needs and communication rules. Now these areas flow into each other within one and the same installation, thus complicating the aesthetic approaches of our value judgments.

So far, this genre hybridisation of contemporary fine art seemed merely a role-playing game to me with the help of which the complex stratification of our world could be expressed.

However, Vilmos Csányi's theory may shed light on the fact, too, that the self-expressive intention of each artist is the manifestation of the group identity of a person's world view. In real communities: "1 People perform joint actions with the members of their communities with pleasure. 2. They easily develop common beliefs within the community. 3. They actively participate in common constructions, be them social, linguistic, abstract, or even object-like constructions. 4. If a member of a community may practice the above activities, loyalty to the community is developed, expressed in the subordination of individual interests to the interests of the community." From this perspective, the educational and informative elements of the installations build a communication channel between the respective cultures of the creator and the recipient, that now differ from each other, again and again, even by explaining the rules for each work of art. The application of this method may stem from the negotiating behaviour as appearing between archaic communities. The individual's private mythology can be compared to the belief systems of earlier communities, while experiences coming from the subconscious to the transcendent. Joint activity can also manifest itself in self-healing games achieving the flow state, while the need to build joint constructions can manifest itself, for example, in the ritual of the *operational chain*, or in various innovations as a means of cognition. In turn, the ancient instinct of group loyalty seems to appear in self-authenticating efforts or in norm-conveying and environmentally conscious attitudes.

I give some examples from my experiences at the last three Venice Biennales. I try to analyse the dynamics that I consider to be general in the material use solutions of the German pavilions of the Biennales, too. All three concepts built their respective messages in the same way, bringing together various intermediary elements and genres, but approaching the issues related to the material from different perspectives. The first one used the scenery logic. The second displayed the building in its natural reality as a medium explored by an archaeologist, evoking the material substance with a certain dispassionate aesthetics. On the last occasion, they managed to create an organic experience through the collaboration of various intermediary genres. In this experience, the combined use of scenery effects revealing their own substantial material nature fermented the formation of the effective message, that can be interpreted without unnecessary explanations, into a multidisciplinary symphony.

However, the 2024 Biennale raised hard questions in me relating to the logic of its curators. How valid is it to speak about valid contexts when the individually fragmented, self-expressive, extremely heterogeneous forms of Western culture are considered on one and the same platform with much more unified historical styles as well as tribal and folk arts which can be considered as its predecessors? If we interpret archaic and folk/tribal arts as expressions of the world views

of communities, then could the self-expressive art of extremely individualized individuals be approached as world views of atomised communities, too, and as such, described along similar dynamics as the archaic and classical predecessors of their respective cultures? In this coordinate system, the language of contemporary fine arts is born from the conflicting combinations of materials, different forms of the common anthropological roots, and the spirit of the times.

Everyday materials, archaic stories

I aim at supporting that the choice and processing of materials conveys significant messages which is worthy of a detailed analysis by presenting my own creative practice, too.

I approach creation through paraphrases, but not that of specific artworks, but of the erosion of ideas and worlds of belief, and also of the creative and culture mediating attitude of contemporary artists of lesser significance. My creations and my installations varied from them respond to the global cultural, civilisational, social and psychological environment in which our belief systems built by coherent, real communities are replaced by the mosaic-like belief constructions of the individual. At the same time, I do not consider my works to be sculptures in the classical sense. These are rather like toys that long to be placed in playhouses, nick-nacks that seek their own meaning in interiors that want to be part of an authentic universe.

I choose materials for medium that are unusual compared to the material selection canon of classical sculpture, and I use myths and motifs that mobilise the information and energies stored in the material by drawing attention to this unusualness, thus building a discourse on the nature of the medium.

Over the past four years, I have worked in the workshop and built installations along the *operational chains* induced by such trains of thought. I approached my theories which I forged from my experiences thus gained and from examples of contemporary fine arts, as if I had created linguistically formulated thought installations by way of an analogy to these artwork variations.

I can also interpret thousands of creative attitudes that guide the material use efforts of fine arts as fractal motifs of human creative power, and therefore I I try to imagine these attitudes as the organic structure of a tree. The genotype of this tree is determined (by our common anthropological features), but it adapts to the continuous variability of external and internal circumstances with variant phenotypes. Anthropological and art history antecedents provide the roots and trunk of the tree, from which the canopy representing the fine arts of our recent past and present unfolds. A main branch is a very thick branch being a direct continuation of the

trunk, which is tied to traditions with narratives formed in the “noble” material, growing often anachronistic branches along ideas that sometimes seem false in this way. The other main branch is material itself that wants to free itself from the linear storytelling form along cubist, dadaist, surrealist, ready-made and *informel* branches up to substances that display themselves in their own reality. Yet another thick branch grows in the direction of complete dematerialisation, and develops its side branches all the way to the rise of virtual realities and artificial intelligence. The next main branch seems to represent creative practices where atomised individuals serve the needs that shape their own one-person group culture in such a way that emphasis is placed on the dynamic relationship between the choice of material and form. Here, the structure ranges from works that build on the harmony or disharmony between material and form, that is, medium and image, that simultaneously analyse the essence of this relationship, to works that examine the aesthetic possibilities of rampant kitsch. Here, the story and myth most often functions as a catalyst (too) that regulates the release of nutrients hidden in the material that shapes it. This is the very branch on which I try to grow a branch.

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