

The Material Imagination (St Andrews, 5-6 Nov 10)

Alistair Rider

Call for Papers

THE MATERIAL IMAGINATION from Antiquity to Modernity

date: 5-6 November 2010

location: School of Art History, University of St Andrews, Scotland

deadline for proposals: 10 September 2010

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As the term materiality gains ever more currency, its critical meaning continues to recede. The purpose of this conference is to investigate an engagement with materials that goes beyond such familiar tropes as ?conspicuous consumption? or ?truth to materials?.

One valuable approach was provided by the philosopher of science Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962), who coined the term ?the material imagination? to mean an insight into substance that preceded intellectual apprehension. We now live in a world ruled by the Periodic Table, but Bachelard dwelt on the Aristotelian essence of Nature, the Four Elements and their limitless permutations at the hands of the Four Humours. In terms of artistic practice, the ?material imagination? poses the more immediate media(tions) between making and perceiving, before elemental evocations and poetic analogies were distanced by the post-enlightenment emphasis on empirical properties, before industrial manufacture removed the material from the realm of nature and myth to the domain of market and product.

However, is Bachelard the only point of reference for art historians and artists committed to mining the implications of materials? Bachelard?s interest in the images that substance evokes is exclusively limited to literature, especially poetry. We are interested in all stages of artistic production, from prospecting raw materials, to forming compounds (from alloys to assemblages), to the range of tensions between the aims of facture and the potential of materials, between the metamorphic and the essential.

We welcome papers in all fields that discuss such topics as durability versus transience, immanence versus transcendence, figuration versus aniconism, craft versus manufacture, 'the natural' versus the synthetic, or any single theme, such as dematerialisation, the virtual environment, 'medium specificity' and fetishism. Papers on all media are welcome, from rock crystal to Bakelite, from steel to vapour.

Organisers: Fabio Barry, Alistair Rider

Please send proposals of ca. 300-500 words for thirty minute papers to material.imagination@gmail.com by 10 September 2010

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