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## **What's the Matter?**

### **Deconstructing the Material Lives of Experience-Driven Artworks**

**Abstract:** This paper, which is part of the fruit of the Ph.D *The Artwork Is Not Present – an investigation into the durational engagement with temporary artworks*, the fundamental role that material plays in experience-driven ephemeral artworks, specifically temporary artworks. A temporary artwork, as defined in this research, is a physical work of an intentionally temporary duration that is created only once. A temporary artwork can be seen as more than a physical and stable object. Rather, it is an experience-driven artwork. Through deconstructing how the material shapes the artwork, we might understand when an artwork is indeed temporary and how the experience of a work is impacted when the work is physically unmade. The process of mapping out the role of material within experience-driven artworks shapes our understanding of the overall significance of material and the manner in which it constructs how a temporary artwork is experienced as present or absent.

**Keywords:** material, temporary art, experience, presence, absence, sugar, conservation theory

The twentieth century represents the beginnings of what is now a relatively young history of durational ambiguity in Western art. This ambiguity arrived alongside the inclusion of ephemeral materials such as photographs and cardboard, works reliant on the human body and performers, auto-destructive art, edible and rotting works, installations based in nature left to face the elements and respond accordingly, and objects constructed from newly developed materials, such as plastics. Works stemming from this period were inevitably physically vulnerable due to their

structural properties and unconventional material. A new vocabulary of material with an appropriate methodology for care needed to be developed for collecting and conserving practices in order to handle this new diverse language of art material. Material began to reflect not only the time in which it was made, but also diverse intentions that could not be read from the artwork alone.

As such, today, what one can assume an artwork discloses has changed. Disclosure, as it is used here, refers to what the artwork tells us about itself and how it does so, in particular as related to its material and construction. There has been what critic and curator Francesco Poli refers to as an ‘epistemological break’ in artistic practice and theory.<sup>1</sup> Poli uses the concept of the ‘epistemological break’ to describe the shift in creative practice that we see in the twentieth century.

This shift in thinking and creative practice, including the use of unconventional materials, has changed the kind of art made, how it is experienced, and how we can think of collecting and conserving for posterity. While the presence of unstable and unconventional materials as art materials is no longer unusual, now including everything from foodstuffs, taxidermy and excrement, the artist’s intent cannot be read from the selection and application of these materials alone. Poli states that in contemporary collecting and conservation thought “It is the materials themselves that represent artistic subjectivity.”<sup>2</sup>

This paper marks out a space of issues and considerations around the significant role that material plays in the life of the temporary artwork, which for the scope of this research refer to works which adhere to the following three criteria: physical works of an intentional temporary duration that are created only once. Artist Kara Walker’s work *A Subtlety* (2014) is discussed as a case study in order to illustrate the dynamic and layered ways in which material can be used to support an artwork’s narrative and shape the experience of an artwork both during its material presence as well as eventual absence.

The physical properties of an artwork as a whole, the material selection, the material’s role within the work, and manner in which the audience is aware of and engages with the physical work, inform the relationship between the artwork as object and its transition to non-object. These dynamics shape and underpin what it means for a temporary artwork to continue to exist outside its original material form. At the early stage of their lives, temporary artworks are transient objects. That is to say that they contain a material component and are thus presented to the primary audience as an object, which over time is physically unmade. They might degrade naturally, or else an action might be imposed to further assist the process of eradicating the physical work, but they always disappear. The temporary artwork is impermanent by design. This design, in adherence to the artist’s intent, takes into account how the artwork is presented. Material is the direct means through which the artist is able to make the artwork present and through which the artist physically gives form as well as figuratively shapes the

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<sup>1</sup> Francesco Poli, “Preface”, in: Oscar Chiantore and Antonio Rava (ed), *Conserving Contemporary Art: Issues, Methods, Materials, and Research*, Los Angeles, Getty Publications, 2012, 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

narrative. Through material selection the artist is able to physically structure a work as well as build on the particular meanings imbued in the material.

In order to begin to understand how we might read the artwork, additional knowledge of the artist's intent has become critical. The artist's intent can be understood as the artist's ideas and wishes surrounding the artwork, and where he or she envisions the identity of the work as a whole lying. This impacts the perimeters of how the work's material can be altered and interacted with, determining the treatment of the artwork. Artist's intent is meant to clarify the artwork's framework through pinpointing where the artwork's identity lies and the philosophy that carries the work. Through formulating an artist's statement, a document of the artist's intent, something which is becoming increasingly common, notably in the case of works which are commissioned and/or sold, the artist is able to communicate the work's constraints and assert which treatments are permissible and which are not. The ambiguity posed by material readings alone often requires this additional information, which has implications for the correct care and presentation of the work. In taking note of the artist's intent, one is able to clarify the artwork's authenticity, which for the purposes of temporary artworks in particular should be understood as the artwork's integrity.

Whereas authenticity in more traditional artworks is often connected to the artwork's original material construction, this is more complex for more contemporary artworks in which the material's changing state, or indeed even the material itself, might not be deemed important by the artist. And so the artwork's authenticity and integrity can also be connected to its visual aesthetics or concept.<sup>3</sup> As explained by conservator Gwynne Ryan, 'original surface', meaning the original material and its initial visual look, loses its hierarchical position within conservation considerations, becoming less important. Instead the role of the material and the manner in which it is supposed to behave become more significant.<sup>4</sup> An increased level of narrative provided by the artist is needed to understand the full work and not put it at risk of inadequate treatment and loss.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, authenticity is located through the artist's intent. Art historians Rebecca Gordon and Erma Hermens suggest that at times, authenticity and intent can be used synonymously.<sup>6</sup>

By examining the selection of materials as well as the manner in which these materials are used, we begin to be able to assess the function of the materials in relation to the identity of the work. This includes understanding what it means for the work's decay to be on display, or equally why a work which is seemingly physically stable is later destroyed. However, object-based study alone does not suffice. Not all

<sup>3</sup> Caroline van der Elst and Alan Phenix, "Proceedings", in: IJsbrand Hummelen and Dionne Sillé (ed.), *Modern Art: Who Cares? An Interdisciplinary Research Project and an International Symposium on the Conservation of Modern and Contemporary Art*, London, Archetype Publications, 1999, 404.

<sup>4</sup> Gwynne Ryan, "Variable materials, variable roles: The shifting skills required in contemporary art conservation", *Objects Specialty Group Postprints*, Vol. 18, 2011, 107.

<sup>5</sup> Both physical loss as well as loss of integrity and adequate representation.

<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Gordon and Erma Hermens, "The Artist's Intent in Flux", *CeROArt*, 2013.

artists' works follow the same frameworks, even when they are constructed from similar materials. Assumptions and decisions should not be based on the material of the artwork alone. Rather, as Ryan emphasizes, the intention and motivation behind the creation of the work must be discussed.<sup>7</sup> When considering how to evaluate and possibly treat an artwork, both the selection of materials and meanings attributed by the artist must be considered.<sup>8</sup> Artist's intent must be continually referenced.

Understanding the relationship between the artwork as a whole and its material provides insight into what is lost or gained through a temporary artwork's material loss. How we understand the artwork both short-term and long-term is affected by these primary dynamics, which include the material significance and changeability of the work. Within contemporary aesthetics, there is an attempt, as Valentina Hribar Sorčan discusses it, to "try to understand a relationship between art and the spirit of time."<sup>9</sup> The material life of a work is important because it is how the work is first experienced and passed down.

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American artist Kara Walker's (b. 1969) recent monumental sugar sphinx, entitled *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby: an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant* (2014) consisted of a larger than life sphinx-like woman made of bleached white sugar, situated in a former sugar refinery, and flanked by child-sized attendants – antebellum figures of slave boys, some made in resin and coated in molasses, and a few cast solely out of sugar.<sup>10</sup> The sugar formed the clear structure of the works, but was imbued with symbolism relating to the narrative of slave trade in sugar plantations.

<sup>7</sup> Laura van Straaten, "Soap, chocolate and dung – how to preserve materials not built to last", *The Art Newspaper*, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Lydia Beerkens et al., *The Artist Interview: For Conservation and Presentation of Contemporary Art Guidelines and Practice*, Heijningen, Jap Sam Book, 2012, 11.

<sup>9</sup> Valentina Hribar Sorčan, "Arts of Crisis: Modern or Postmodern", *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies*, Issue No. 3, 2013, 46.

<sup>10</sup> Walker's body of work revisits a history of violence and color through what Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw describes as "an artistic process of racialized signification" engaging with and portraying the history of African-American slavery. Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2005, 5.

Walker's art is entrenched in themes of power, destruction and loss, playing on the multiplicitous character of these themes. Loss as a physical characteristic of the work furthermore took on a political character, in which the significance of the material the artist was working with sugar, collected and refined by black bodies – and the vulnerability and ultimate destruction of these sugar bodies made visual and apparent the uncomfortable history of the sugar trade. The material, moulded sugar, and its shaping into the figures of young boys, formed a comment on the money and power gained from the frail bodies handling this trade, and the subsequent tragedies. This storyline was made all the more palpable as the boys made solely out of sugar grew increasingly gaunt and disfigured until they simply melted away towards the end of the show. The work was commissioned for the non-profit arts organization *Creative Time*, and installed at the former Domino Sugar factory in Brooklyn, New York, between May and July 2014. *A Subtlety* was influenced by Walker's reading of Sidney W. Mintz' tome *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*.<sup>11</sup>

The significance of the material selection relates furthermore to the space in which the work was situated, a sugar refinery, as well as to the subject of the work: black slavery. Notably, sugar in itself alone does not tell this story. The same material can play upon different histories and require different readings as shaped by the overall context of the artwork.

*A Subtlety* also spoke about race through color (the brown boys made of molasses surrounding the bleached sphinx made out of refined sugar for white Western consumption), while the sweetness and sensuality darkly gave literal shape and narrated the figures carved out of it, speaking about the usability of black bodies and Western appetites.

Material identity is found not only through the selection of material, but meaning also lies in the how the material is applied. Material, or matter, has what Fatma Aykanat discusses as a “narrative power of creating configurations of meanings”.<sup>12</sup> Part of the narrative of a temporary artwork is its literal material unmaking – the process of undoing its physical structure and eradicating the art object. The artist creates something that will ultimately and knowingly (by both the artist, and generally the audience) cease to exist. For Walker it is a combined process of allowing the sugar to melt during the exhibition – the audience bearing witness – and eventually having the installation dismantled outside the public eye. The significance of this material unmaking lies in the work's courting its inevitable loss and ultimately in how the performance of loss plays out in the eyes of those present and in the minds of those who hear about it later.

Walker has described the whole installation as “not necessarily landmark by plank but landmark by memory and by the re-telling of residents and visitors who bore witness to her arrival and departure.”<sup>13</sup> *A Subtlety* (2014) was dismantled and dis-

<sup>11</sup> Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, New York, Viking Press, 1985.

<sup>12</sup> Fatma Aykanat, “How to Recycle Ourselves through Art: Rubbish Inspirations in Contemporary Art”, *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies*, Issue No. 5, 2014, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Antwaun Sargent, “Interview: Kara Walker Decodes Her New World Sphinx at Domino Sugar Factory”, *Complex Art + Design*, May 2014.

carded after the duration of the exhibition, save for the Sphinx's left hand, which the artist has retained. The work as a whole lives on through those who have seen it firsthand, their experiences passed on, alongside the artist's and commissioning body's documentation, so that the work may continue to live on in its material absence.

Material selection configures the identity and experience of the temporary artwork, parallel to which material ephemerality is integral to the identity and conception of the temporary artwork. For Walker's work through natural weathering and eventual dismantling, the absence of the structure is emblematic of the lost work and continues to function in unison with the material's meaning. The temporary artwork's material is therefore structure and signifier in its presence, and also in its absence. Thus understanding the material, how it held the physical work together, but also what meanings the artist ascribed to it, remain important not only for the primary experience of the artwork, but also for any future experience. The meaning is derived not only from the artwork and its material, but also from the context of the artwork – most notably even when there is no permanent object.<sup>14</sup>

The material obsolescence is inbuilt as the installation partially melted and was later dismantled. The inherent physical change in the work disrupts the previously-existing positions between the exhibiting, collecting and conserving bodies – asking for the boundaries of what the artwork is, and how it is sustained, to be reconsidered and reformulated. The material is both structure and signifier, not only in its material selection, but also in the manner in which the matter moves and acts within the work as a whole. In this sense, borrowing from philosopher and communication theorist Marshall McLuhan, “the medium is the message.”<sup>15</sup> The process of physical unmaking directs both the work and our attention as viewers, creating a tension.

A temporary artwork's inherent properties not only give shape to the work insofar as creating an object, but as in the case of *A Subtlety*, these properties also destabilize the object, shaping the trajectory of the physical work over time. The material both literally shapes the work as well as figuratively assists in telling the story of the work through symbolism imbued in the material and its process of inherent weathering.

Walker consciously created an installation that is only partially visibly moving and changing. The large sphinx-like bleached sugar figure stands still, seemingly unmoved alongside the figures of the boys. Those figures with a resin skeleton seem equally frozen. Juxtaposed with these unmovable figures, the soon-to-be lost boys made wholly out of sugar become more apparent. They melt from the heat and humidity over the course of the exhibition as the audience passively watches the unfolding destruction. The form of movement and action determine the subject-object relationship between the audience and artwork, as well as the objects' transition from object to non-object. Both these aspects give shape to the audience's experience as

<sup>14</sup> Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, London, MIT Press, 2003, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1994.

they determine where the artwork lay in its physical present, and eventually in its material past.

Walker's audience is complicit in watching the work unfold. Temporary artworks require witnesses, and raise the question of what the audience bears witness to: presence or absence. Something that is but soon won't be, or something that was but no longer is. It is in some ways an experience of history in the making versus historical account.

Singular material embodiment is the key defining characteristic that sets temporary artworks apart from works simply constructed out of fugitive or vulnerable materials. This is because the temporary artwork's material configuration cannot be revisited. The work is present only once, namely for the duration of its limited display. This changes the primary experience of the work by impacting how the work is read. It also determines that the work can only be known to future audiences by what is left, i.e. memories, documents. To discover and experience *A Subtlety* (2014), now, is to do so through the accounts of the primary audience. Later audiences can know the work only in its physical absence and try to come close to the work as a secondary audience.

Due to their singular material embodiment, the scope of the primary audience for temporary artworks is strictly limited. The work's material ending is inevitable, and if the work's temporariness is respected, future generations of audiences come to know the artwork only as non-primary audiences. In essence, future generations are expected to experience the work through its material absence rather than through a first-hand experience of the material work. Nevertheless, the artwork's material still shapes the audience's experience, both in its presence, and significantly, later, in its absence.

By necessity, the future of the work includes a kind of variability in understanding that what the work is in its material presence is not the same thing as the experience of the work in its absence. The artwork that no longer physically exists can continue to resonate with new generations of audiences and new experiences can be shaped from secondary information. In trying to keep the work relevant, what matters is how its absence is contextualized. What exists after the work's initial primary existence is no longer the material artwork, but rather as traces of the work, documentation and the memory of something that no longer is. The experience of absence does not replace the experience of the material presence of the artwork, but rather complements it, and could even be said to be an extension of the artwork's life. Material thus constructs an experience of presence and absence.