

## Encounters

By Laura White

What follows are my rememberings of artworks, stuff and other accumulations that I have come across this past year in my encounters with your work. These are not memories of momentary engagements, like the ones I have walking slowly through a museum or gallery, glancing at the artworks and artefacts as I make way to a particular destination. Most likely this will be an object, sculpture, singular or plural, that I value, find interesting, that challenges me or I just like the look of, as I concentrate my gaze for 5 minutes, more or less. No, these things that I am writing about I have engaged with for longer as I experience them throughout the tutorial or convenor session: a space where conversations are caught in the visual, audio and tactile experiences that influence and reshape my participation with the stuff in front of me. There I can allow my thoughts to meander and enter other experiences and other memories, to make connections with other things, like those that interest me in realms of anthropology, material culture and science. Here I can recount this process, this movement, from the stuff of the world to these words on a screen -- a movement through imagination, a process fuelled by my fascination with everyday stuff.

There are two objects sat on the convenor room floor. I first came across them as prototypes in a tutorial and now they have been made into two similarly shaped objects produced in different materials. I find it difficult to determine what they are made of by just looking at them. They are white in colour, but not the same white.

As soon as I enter this room in the Tate gallery this work demands my attention: Richard Tuttle's piece in the permanent collection at Tate Modern, titled '8th Paper Octagonal' 1970, bond paper and wheat paste. It is a white cut-out paper shape that has been glued to the wall absolutely flat, and yet stands out so prominently due to the fact it is a different white to the rest of the walls in the gallery. When two whites sit next to each other I can really notice their different hue and tonality, like the objects on the floor in the convenor, precisely placed next to each other and holding their personal and unique whiteness. I imagine how each white object would feel, different in texture, temperature and weight if I were to hold them both. However, in observing them I gauge the difficulty of picking them up at the same time. They are just a bit too big. But I can imagine picking up one at a time and holding each comfortably in my arms. I can tell that they have smooth surfaces by the light reflecting off of them. Not too smooth, like glazed porcelain, but more like unglazed biscuit fired porcelain: matt whites that absorb rather than reflect the light streaming in from the window close by. I have a rough idea of how heavy they are, drawing from the experience of handling objects of a similar size and made of the materials 'I think' these works might be composed of.

It is only through handing lots of comparable materials that one can really understand the subtlety of their weight. Visiting the Institute of Making at UCL, where they have a library of materials, I stand looking along a trestle table laid out with a grid of cubes of exactly the same dimensions, but made of different materials. There is everything from foam types to a range of wood samples and I spend a long time picking up two at a time to compare the feeling of the different blocks. I pay attention to the weight, temperature,

texture and stability of the selected two materials sitting in the palm of my hands. I run my fingers around to feel the subtle differences of their surfaces, such as a bump or an indentation, which might reveal information about the materials' inner properties. For example, a scratch might uncover a soft interior, or a swell might communicate a possible chemical reaction that has caused the material to expand -- like when fungi or weeds push up from under tarmac, just before they crack through the surface and into the natural light. In fact, most of the material cubes were pretty perfect, cut precisely with little damage to them, but there was the occasional small dent from wear and tear, probably caused by people like me picking them up and occasionally dropping them on the floor, or catching them on other blocks when returning them to their allocated slot.

I enter a studio full to capacity, stuff piled up in a succession of mounds and peaks, a mountain range not of earth, rock and grass, but cartons, cups and plastic bags. Evidence of daily eating habits, a cup of tea and pastry for breakfast, lunchtime sandwich and mid afternoon tea-break, defined by the remnants of plastic and card that has accompanied these once fresh purchases. These heaps also include clothing, swirling whirlwinds of jumpers intersected with trousers and socks, with the odd shoe poking out like an animals' nose smelling the fresh air from out of its fusty burrow. I am so caught up in this accumulation that it takes me some time to raise my eyes up to the wall above where the artworks for discussion are displayed, released from the piles below and breathing in a little air -- although my eyes and the wall based works can't help again and again to reconnect to these foothills of playful hoarding.

What I found most interesting was handling two similar materials, such as picking up metal cubes, which appeared quite similar, and yet, holding them felt so different. Some metals in the library were heavy and dense, like the cube of iron, while the aluminium was astonishingly lightweight. (I know aluminium is lighter than iron, but unless I pick them up at the same time I don't understand the precise difference in tactile experience -- not only is the aluminium lighter, but also warmer and softer.) When I get the opportunity to handle so many different materials in one place at one time I can appreciate and identify particular properties of a given type of matter, noticing details that are heightened by the fact I am able to compare them apposed to handling one at a time. The experience made me think that it would be amazing to have more than two hands, so I can hold and compare multiple blocks all at once, which would give me a vast insight into these material variations.

Observing these two objects in two different materials placed on the convenor floor, I found myself thinking about how much information I could ascertain by just looking at them. But looking can also be deceptive, such as when one looks at the bronze sculptures of Jeff Koons or the Chapman Brothers, who have used the heavy permanent material to replicate light weight ephemeral things such as inflatable or disposable objects. Although my brain tells me that these objects, through their depiction of the subject matter, are lightweight, there are clues in their appearance that suggest otherwise. For example, the structures that are holding them in place, which behave in a particular way conducive to supporting something heavier -- like a metal chain taught under the weight, or the point where the object meets the surface it sits on, that is a

little too firm and secure. Also, for every attempt to replicate a surface of a material with another material, it is simply not possible to be exact, as the material being used to do the replication has as many unique qualities as the one it is mimicking. It comes down to trust. Whether I can trust or am willing to trust what I see, and whether I question what the object is proposing.

A strip of Foam fixed to a studio wall by its flexible nature wants to sag towards the floor. This air filled, lightweight material makes up the interiors of an array of objects we use to cushion our bodies in seated, leaning, lounging and lying positions, such as on chairs, sofas, beds, leaning panels on buses and arm rests in theatres. This work clinging to the wall draws my attention to the familiar glossary of daily materials and their functions, but this object is not playing by the rules -- an irresponsible shelf which when anything comes in contact with it, has a capacity for catapulting ornaments into the air, crashing down on the floor.

The colours of these manufactured foams are very rarely seen as they are usually fixed to wooden, metal and fiberglass structures, then covered or upholstered, exposing only their form and ability to morph and distort in response to someone pressing against them -- bum, head, arm or entire body. This stuff comes in all sorts of bright colours to code its density, but now I find myself shifting my reading of colour from information gatherer to aesthetic spectator.

There are many extraordinary moments when what I touch, pick up or grab does not feel or behave like I expect. These are the moments of intrigue and surprise, which also come with a feeling of distrust and anxiety. Imagine if every thing you stood on, once leaving your home, was not the material you expected. You would probably feel pretty terrified that something might happen to you. The ground might eat you up, as if stepping into a bog, like the ones you find on moorland where the mossy appearance of the bogs surface looks identical to the firm ground. Usually I have already made a calculation as to how a material that I confront will behave when I touch it with my hands, or tread with my feet. So when it isn't what I expect, then I distrust it and the other stuff in proximity. For example, when I pick up a plastic cup and it feels soft and unstable, rather than rigid and liquid resistant. Maybe the fluid inside is affecting the condition of the cup and should therefore not be trusted, neither the cup nor the contents. I'm sure it is a good thing that these moments occur in everyday activities, to awaken the senses, and to breakup the routine of readily acceptable encounters.

When you are next walking down the pavement of you're nearest high street, think about the different surfaces your feet are coming into contact with. (More precisely, your feet are feeling through the sole of your shoes, so really a once removed encounter of the pavement.) From stone and concrete to tarmac and gravel, and within these four materials the numerous variations that alter and change in substance depending on where the materials are sourced, who laid them, the weather conditions (hot weather warming and softening the material and, in extreme circumstances, melting them), and their history revealed through wear and tear. This makes me think of sump holes that can suddenly appear in the ground eating up whatever and whoever is above, a reminder of the stuff or the lack of stuff beneath the immediate surfaces that clad our urban environments.

The material around us, whether in view or hidden underneath or behind facades, is pretty vulnerable to change. It might crack, split or bend when put under pressure, large vibrations and other types of impact. But if I went about my daily business worrying about this I would be in constant fear of walking on unfamiliar and unstable materials that could behave unreliably and unpredictably, which would be a very scary world to live in, don't you think? So instead I will put my head in the soft unpredictable sand, and trust that engineers and town planning are keeping check on these things on my behalf, so that the likelihood of this happening is kept to a minimum.

I'm constantly taking inspiration from the work and stuff that occupies the artists' studio, your studios, where the studio and the work are in constant collision. Scruffy walls meet pristine prints, disposable coffee cups occupy the same surface as finished and planned exhibited works. These languages of unpredictable and unintentional juxtapositions are the places of exciting possibilities. Often I have things hanging around on tabletops and on the floor of my studio for months, and sometimes years, picked up and moved around on a regular basis. And then at some point they are committed to a decision and pulled out from the accumulating detritus to become something defined and chosen.

Objects often invite or rely on a human interaction, like a window blind, which when pulling or releasing the strings on either side draws up to open or releases to shut down, and alters the angle of the individual metal or plastic strips to control the amount of light passing through the slats. This particular single blind is not attached to the top of an interior window frame, but held in both hands by its human operator, who animates the object, or possibly the other way around, across the convenor room floor. Objects can take control of us when we least expect, dictating how we move our bodies around them, such as handling things that have joints and hinges, which when you grip hold to pick up can quickly change their posture and shape, like assembling a deckchair or fold down table, where the legs and arms stretch and bend unpredictably putting the handlers grip in jeopardy.

In the film 'Japanese Story' 2003, directed by Sue Brooks, a Japanese business man been guided through the Australian Outback by a female guide, when jumping into a shallow pool of water to cool himself down hits his head on a rock and is instantly killed. The woman is forced to take his body to the nearest town, as it is too remote to call for help. She drags his slender frame up the muddy bank to the back of her truck to lift him into the trunk. This is an extraordinary moment as we watch her gather up his linked limbs, head and torso into a bundle to make him into a manageable shape she can lift. Although he is a slight man his dead weight proves more difficult to maneuver than she can physically handle, and every time she attempts to pick him up, a leg or arm unravels, escaping the human bundle, making it desperately awkward to lift him onto the tailgate of the vehicle, where on a number of occasions when she nearly has him secure, a leg springs out, dangling over the edge of the truck, pulling the rest of the body back down onto the ground.

When I make things in my studio I am aware that what I create is a product of how I made it, vast amounts of choices happening every minute and even seconds, choices between doing something one way and not another. To observe this of another artist would be very

revealing and it made me think as I looked around this studio space where we sat, me and the artist whose work it was, how I might understand this aftermath if I was able to observe how it came about. Watching the artist print over painted paper in the print room and then reapplying paint on top of these images back in her studio, then to watch how she moves these around, how she fixes them to the wall, attaching and reattaching. How far back she moves to look at the multiple works on the wall and how many times she returns close up to look at the individual parts, or maybe she doesn't do any of this? How when she passes the table in the middle of the space, she glances at the cut out image from a newspaper clipping, of a woman being manhandled in a street in a place that I am unfamiliar with, and that then alters how she reads the images directly in front of her, which she subsequently swaps over. I would learn so much if I were to see this activity. We all do things in particular ways. You only have to watch the same activity being done by a group of people to see that we all have our own unique means of doing things.