

Materials and Meaning in Contemporary Sculpture
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In the late 1960s, white American artist Fred Sandback initiated a body of materially simple work that integrated sculpture and drawing while raising questions about the boundary of the artwork. He stretched lengths of cord across the gallery so as to divide up space and, sometimes, create quasi-architectural constructions. Many of the works activate the entire gallery space they're positioned in, seeming to incorporate the space into the work itself.

Around the same time, Melvin Edwards made several works that are formally similar to Sandback's. Edwards, too, stretched material from wall to wall to divide space and make geometric constructions that function architecturally. There is a notable difference between the two bodies of work, however: Edwards, who is African American, made his sculptures from barbed wire.

Edwards's works efficiently highlight everything that the minimalist movement, occurring during a time of tremendous social change in the US, left on the table. In the wake of the atrocities of World War II and in the midst of the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, the second wave feminist movement, the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., and the murders of civil rights workers by the Klan, Fred Sandback was stretching string. Whereas Sandback's works encourage and reward a form of contemplation that treats the artwork as connected only to *art* history and artistic concerns, Edwards's works demand that we re-engage our social and historical

sensibilities, seeing the artwork as directly connected to surrounding events and a history of injustice. They do this not by offering a narrative or representational form that points us to this history, but by virtue of their materials. Barbed wire has, in Edwards's words, the "capacity of painful dynamic and aggressive resistance if contacted unintelligently,"¹ lending itself to connotations of war and confinement.

Because of the salience of barbed wire in an art-making context, Edwards's body of work activates a whole range of historical and cultural associations belonging to the material. This has a profound impact on the content of the work. It raises questions about art-making and art consumption: what are we doing here, in the studio and the museum, and how does and should our activity relate to happenings in the broader society? The significance of Edwards's choice is apparent in an observation by artist David Hammons, who notes, of one of Edwards's works incorporating barbed wire,

That was the first abstract piece of art that I saw that had cultural value in it for black people. I couldn't believe that piece when I saw it because I didn't think you could make abstract art with a message.²

At the same time, by simply including barbed wire without commenting on it or using it to construct a narrative, Edwards creates a body of work that poses questions while offering no direct social or political commentary. As Edwards points out, barbed wire is also a practical material:

Using barbed wire, you have to be aware that it was a way to keep the cows at home. But then people turned it into concentration camps.... Those contradictions, or contradistinctions, are things that have occupied me in visual art.³

Edwards notes that the materials came “already loaded” with the relevant associations, while also being suited to the same art historical and aesthetic project pursued by

Sandback:

Well, between the chain and the barbed wire, you’ve touched on drawing in space with totally different materials. Here I had materials that were what they were, but people already had them loaded with poetic and political and other realities.⁴

The work thus engages with minimalism, but by virtue of its materials also invites contemplation of how that artistic project relates to the political context and to the more practical activities for which the same materials are more often deployed.

1. A neglected question

An extensive literature about pictorial representation discusses what is involved when a two-dimensional image represents some specific object or type of object.⁵ A much smaller literature addresses parallel issues in sculptural representation.⁶ But little has been said about the role played by the sculptural material itself in determining the meanings of the sculptural work.

Traditional materials like bronze and marble make straightforward, though circumscribed, contributions to the meanings of the sculpture. Choice of material positions the work historically and may be suggestive of its value: Michelangelo’s use of stone for his *David*, in contrast to the bronze of Donatello’s, connects his work with classical sculpture and thereby affords his subject a particular dignity.⁷ Sculptural material contributes to the work’s visual content by determining the color and surface texture, though this typically does not mean we should attribute these qualities to the

represented subject: Michelangelo's use of stone to create his *Pietà* does not encourage us to attribute to his subjects the color or texture of the material or the qualities hard, cold, or stony. Indeed, the very contrast between the qualities of the material and the qualities we are to attribute to the represented subjects contributes to our sense of the artist's achievement in wresting these fluid, organic forms from such a rigid and unforgiving material. The fact that, by convention, the qualities of the sculptural material do not typically translate to the represented subject lends the material a certain neutrality: we may accept the material as a given rather than asking deep questions about what the artist was trying to express in choosing this or that material.

Contemporary sculptural works, by contrast, frequently incorporate nonstandard materials like chocolate, shoes, sugar, barbed wire, and blood. I take it to be uncontroversial, and supported by the practice of artists, critics, curators, and audiences, that such materials can and do contribute to sculptural content. However, there is virtually no philosophical discussion of this issue. My aim is to open up a new topic for discussion, what I'll call *inclusion content*: content a sculptural work possesses by virtue of the specific materials or objects it includes. The material itself is part of the work's content – the work quite literally contains it – and it also contributes to the work's visual content, or appearance, by supplying color, texture, and sometimes other aspects of form. In addition, as we will see, materials can contribute to the work's expressive content – its meanings – in ways that go beyond contributing aspects of appearance. These contributions may occur by way of any number of properties the material contributes to the work – visual appearance, historical attributes, and functional attributes, to name a

few – that become salient in the context of the work or tend to generate salient associations that are then available for interpretation.

I will discuss works that incorporate non-standard raw materials, works that incorporate whole objects, and works that treat whole objects rather as though they were raw material, giving examples in section 2. In sections 3 and 4, I will argue that for representational works, inclusion content may affect what is represented, how it is represented, and the broader themes and meanings we are to attribute to the work. For non-representational works like Edwards's, inclusion content may facilitate allusion or metaphor that undercuts interpretations according to which the work's function is purely formal or aesthetic.

In sections 6 and 7, I suggest that the notions of literal and metaphorical exemplification, in the sense discussed by Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin, are helpful in analyzing how inclusion content contributes to the work's meaning.⁸ Because exemplification is a matter of salience, the artist can promote inclusion content through titling, description of the artwork medium, and auxiliary statements. However, as we see in section 5, artists' ability to cancel out unwanted implications of their materials is limited: where resonances and associations are salient to the viewer, they cannot be eliminated by artistic fiat.

As I argue in section 8, inclusion content is not produced through appearances alone: simulacra function differently than works that really include the materials they appear to include. This is due in part to the fact that inclusion content affects the possibilities the work offers to us, leading us to have bodily experiences and imaginings that contribute to interpretation.

2. Inclusion of novel materials

I'll discuss three ways in which non-standard materials tend to be incorporated in works of sculpture. I'll give examples of each to demonstrate the range and pervasiveness of the phenomenon. Several of these examples will be taken up at greater length below.

Inclusion of a plastic material

First, a material with a high degree of plasticity may be used to create a sculpture through a process of casting, aggregation or carving. While in such cases the sculptural form tends to be paramount, the material typically lends both appearance qualities and cultural resonances to the work.

Kara Walker's monumental 2014 *A Subtlety* incorporates several varieties of sugar: the enormous Black female sphinx figure has a surface of refined white sugar, while some of the child worker figures are cast in brown sugar and others cast in resin and coated in molasses.⁹

Janine Antoni's 1993 *Lick and Lather* consists of 7 self-portrait busts made of chocolate that Antoni cast and then licked with her mouth, and 7 made of soap that she shaped by rubbing in the bathtub. Antoni's 1992 work *Gnaw* is constituted of a 600-pound cube of lard and a 600-pound cube of chocolate that the artist carved by chewing. She preserved the chewed chocolate and lard and used them to make other objects: the chocolate was used to make replicas of the kind of brown plastic packaging in which chocolates are sold, and the lard was incorporated into lipsticks.¹⁰

In an ongoing series that began in 1991, Marc Quinn has made a series of self-portraits from his own frozen blood. He takes a direct cast of his head, then creates a mold into which the blood is poured. The work is completed through a process of freezing.¹¹

Inclusion of whole objects

A second practice involves the inclusion of whole objects, sometimes with salient historical attributes. The material qualities and historical attributes of the objects embedded in these works tend to be interpretively salient, since the objects maintain their distinctiveness even as they are incorporated into more complex constructions.

Ai Weiwei's various works titled *Colored Vases*, created in the mid-2000s, consist of groupings of Neolithic vases (5000-3000 BCE) that Ai covered with industrial paints.¹² These works resonate with Ai's 1995 work *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, a series of three photographs showing Ai destroying an urn that is over 2000 years old.¹³ Ai highlights the historical origins of the vessels through the title or medium description of each work, inviting questions about the extent to which contemporary artistic and commercial production should be beholden to respect for the traditions and material culture of the past.

For Zhan Wang's 2006 *Urban Landscape: Beijing*, stainless steel kitchen implements are used to construct a replica of the city.¹⁴ The individual objects are clearly discernible even as they are incorporated into a larger structure that sculpturally represents architectural and infrastructural elements of Beijing.

Two other works from this category will be discussed at greater length below.

Willie Cole's 2007 *Shine*, a portrait, is one of the artist's many works constructed from shoes.¹⁵ Zoe Leonard's 1992-1997 *Strange Fruit (for David)* consists of hundreds of peels from fruits that she and her friends ate, and that she later stitched up with thread and sequins.¹⁶

Inclusion of existing objects that are treated as sculptural material

There are also many works that occupy the boundary between the two types I've identified, treating pre-existing objects rather as though they were raw sculptural materials. I consider Melvin Edwards's barbed-wire works to occupy this category.

El Anatsui has made a series of wall-hung works out of liquor bottle tops. However, he uses over a dozen specific techniques that allow him to extract a wide variety of distinct effects from this material, turning it into something of a sui generis medium.¹⁷

Felix Gonzalez-Torres incorporates wrapped hard candies into many of his works, forming them into configurations like carpets, as with his 1997 "Untitled" (Placebo),¹⁸ or piles, as with the 1991 "Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.).¹⁹ The candies are formed into appealing constructions, but a key aspect of Gonzalez-Torres's works is that their commonplace use value is not canceled: audience members are permitted to consume them.

Tara Donovan's 2004 *Untitled (Pins)* is a 29-inch cube made from dressmaker's pins.²⁰ The bristling surface, both alluring and threatening, disrupts the smooth, austere aesthetic of the minimalist cube. The material, listed as #17 steel dressmaker pins, invites

but does not force an interpretation that juxtaposes the masculine tendencies of the minimalist movement with traditionally feminine forms of artistic and cultural labor, including domestic fiber arts. The work leaves it open to us to contemplate the cube in a principally formal and art historical light, or to focus more squarely on the content suggested by the specificity of the objects it incorporates.

3. Inclusion content and sculptural representation

Several of the works I've listed involve sculptural representation of identifiable objects. When sculptural representation is present, how, if at all, does inclusion content affect it? Does inclusion content affect *what* is sculpturally represented? Does it affect *how* it is sculpturally represented? Or does it affect the content of the sculptural work in some other way?

When pre-existing objects are incorporated into sculptural representations, there is one obvious effect on sculptural representation: the shapes of the pre-existing objects constrain the shapes of the sculpture. The specific shapes are thus implicated both in what is represented and in how it is represented. In Zhan Wang's *Urban Landscape: Beijing*, the handles of spoons and forks are cleverly used to represent movement trails behind vehicles. In Willie Cole's *Shine*, the shapes of the shoes determine the perceived shape and expression of the face of the represented figure.

However, we don't necessarily take the represented subject to be completely isomorphic in shape with the sculptural form. Some aspects of the form of a sculptural representation are indicative of the style of representation, rather than attributable to what is represented. When Giacometti creates a sculpture with a very rough texture, we do not

understand that texture to indicate that the represented subject has isomorphically rough skin or garments. The texture is certainly expressive, and may even be expressive of something about the depicted subject; but it is not directly expressive of what the subject actually looks like: the contribution to expression is not by way of representing visual features we are meant to attribute to the subject's appearance. The conventions and practices of sculpture allow this sort of distinction between features meant to sculpturally represent something about the depicted object and stylistic features that are expressive, but not by way of their contribution to sculptural representation.²¹ As with Giacometti, some aspects of the form of Cole's *Shine* seem to be stylistic rather than representational. I don't mean to suggest that this distinction is always clear; it is a stylistic choice of Giacometti's to elongate his figures, and there may be no crisp way to determine whether we should say he is representing his subjects as elongated or, rather, merely offering elongated representations of those subjects. However, the absence of a clear boundary does not undermine the basic viability of the distinction.

Highly plastic materials like blood, sugar, soap, chocolate and lard place fewer constraints on the shape of the sculpture, though of course they affect its color and texture. Do these affect the qualities we should attribute to the represented subjects? The answer is variable. The fact that Kara Walker, in *A Subtlety*, gives the large sphinx figure a surface of white sugar does not mean that she is representing the woman, whose features are identifiably Black, as white in color, any more than sculptures made in bronze represent their subjects as dark in color. But the color of the material nonetheless affects the sculpture's content, in part because of an allusion to race and racialization. Walker has said,

[Y]ou can't get sugar without heavy-duty processing; you don't get refined sugar, you get other things. This desire for refined sugar and what it means to turn sugar from brown to white and how that dovetails into becoming an American were fascinating to me. Sugar is loaded with meaning, with stories about meaning.²²

In western contexts, whiteness has been historically valorized and treated as worthy of artistic representation, while blackness has been socially demonized and artistically marginalized. The refinement of sugar, rather like coerced racial assimilation, expels distinctive and variable elements of color, texture and flavor to achieve a homogenous project that is marketed under a guise of purity. Walker's use of sugar will be discussed in more detail later, but for now we may note that the color of the material contributes to the work's content in ways that are complex and not reducible to affecting the color we are meant to attribute to the represented subject.

Generally speaking, the use of non-traditional materials with distinctive colors makes those colors eligible for consideration in our interpretations of the work. When Janine Antoni makes some portrait busts of white soap and some of brown chocolate, it is natural to consider the possibility that race is relevant, and that connections are being postulated among the material, the sculptural action of licking or bathing, and the subject racialized in a particular way. Even if we ultimately reject this interpretation, finding that there is nothing else in these works or in Antoni's total body of work to support it, there is nothing that obviously makes it ineligible for consideration from the start.

As with Walker's *Subtlety*, the color of the material in Marc Quinn's *Self 2006* seems to affect the content of the work without being directly transferred to the represented subject. I take it that Quinn is not representing himself as having the color of

the blood; but at the same time, the material's grayish, frozen quality, combined with the closed eyes and the artifacts of the process of direct silicone casting from Quinn's own head, causes the portrait to resemble a death mask. Perhaps, then, the work represents its subject as ghastly through the specific color lent by the frozen blood. Non-standard sculptural materials are more prone than standard sculptural materials to make distinctive contributions to the content of the work, simply because there is not a standing convention in place according to which we treat the material and its color as largely neutral.

4. Inclusion content and interpretation

As we have begun to see, many of the interesting effects of inclusion content occur not by way of influence on sculptural representation (e.g., on the color, form or texture we attribute to the represented object) but separately from it – though, of course, inclusion content interacts with sculptural representation, when it is present, in determining the meanings of the work.

Let's return to Quinn's work. The fact that the self-portrait is made from the artist's own blood must influence how we understand the work, though perhaps not by changing what we take the sculpture to represent or the qualities we attribute to its subject. And the kinds of contribution it may make to our understanding are relatively diverse and open-ended, since there are no prior conventions that restrict us to understanding the significance of the material in one way or another, or that neutralize some connotations of the material (in the way that the color of bronze tends to be neutralized).

The work, titled *Self*, sculpturally represents Quinn through isomorphism of form that was secured by taking a direct cast of his head. However, the inclusion of blood raises questions about the nature of portraiture, especially in a context where it has become commonplace for art students to generate “self-portraits” by displaying objects that convey aspects of the self without representing the artist’s face or body. Is it the object’s resemblance to Quinn that makes it a self-portrait, or instead the direct casting process by which the object was created, the incorporation of some of the actual material of his person, the fact that his unique genetic signature is encoded in the object, or indeed all of these things together? *Self 2006* seems to be a self-portrait on steroids.

The cultural resonance of blood, too, contributes to the inclusion content of the work. The large quantity of the artist’s blood in each work would have been medically removed over a period of time. Blood thus removed is often used for therapeutic purposes, though not in this case. Blood gives life, but its loss through injury and wound can result in death. The fact that the blood is frozen highlights the fragility of the work, which seems just one power failure away from reverting to a pool of blood.²³ Blood can prompt squeamishness, unease. Any of these resonances is potentially in play as we interpret the work, if it helps us to make sense of the fact that the work is constructed of blood rather than some other material.

According to the conception of interpretation I’m relying on, certain elements of a work simply must be taken into account by the interpreter. Antoni’s busts, and Quinn’s head, are self-portraits; incorporating this into one’s interpretations is mandatory. But not all aspects of interpretation are mandatory: it is up to the interpreter to determine which

of the work's elements are fruitfully included in an interpretation that makes sense of the work and brings out its value.

Inclusion content provides us with fodder for the creative activity of interpretation: some of the associations and resonances of blood will figure in an interpretation of Quinn's work, and others won't. But at the same time, it is mandatory to grapple with the significance of non-standard materials in some way or other. One cannot interpret Quinn's *Self 2006* or Antoni's *Lick and Lather* without considering blood or chocolate and soap. But which aspects and resonances of these materials we must consider in interpretation is not settled by their inclusion in the work.

5. Inclusion content and the artist's intention

Does the artist have a direct role to play in determining which aspects of inclusion content we must account for in interpretation? The artist's principal role, in my view, is to construct the work in a way that makes particular readings salient to the careful viewer. But I also hold that the artist has some special authority in drawing our attention to aspects of inclusion content that are directly relevant to the work.

Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* points us toward particular aspects of inclusion content quite directly: the full title of the work is *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*. The unpaid artisans she refers to are enslaved people, and the child laborer figures which gradually melted away and, in some instances, collapsed

over the course of the exhibition, call to mind those enslaved people – some of whom were, indeed, children.

The title Walker gives the work, the site (a defunct sugar factory), and the sculptural content of the work all point us toward aspects of the sugar that we must grapple with: not just its sweetness, not just its whiteness or granularity, but its historical connections to inequality and exploitation. Walker makes this content clearly internal to the work by way of the title, not relying on subsidiary artist statements, though she makes these as well. Adequate interpretations, then, must take this content into account.

Nato Thompson, who curated the exhibition, says this:

Walker's gigantic temporary sugar-sculpture speaks of power, race, bodies, women, sexuality, slavery, sugar refining, sugar consumption, wealth inequity, and industrial might that uses the human body to get what it needs no matter the cost to life and limb. Looming over a plant whose entire history was one of sweetening tastes and aggregating wealth, of refining sweetness from dark to white, she stands mute, a riddle so wrapped up in the history of power and its sensual appeal that one can only stare stupefied, unable to answer.²⁴

How is a female figure, with her vast vulva exposed by her kneeling posture, connected to the historical injustices of sugar? The stereotypical mammy figure of Aunt Jemima has long been used to market some of the products of the sugar industry in the US. But a more crucial connection is to the fact that women's bodies were productive of the labor force that maintained the slave trade. Rape was a mechanism through which this labor force was reproduced; and thus the Black woman's body was understood as always

sexually available, and the withholding of the woman's consent either irrelevant or inconceivable.²⁵ The economy of sugar that extracted labor from some and produced wealth for others, then, is connected to a history of violent exploitation of Black women specifically.

The sweetness and sensual qualities of the sugar, too, are seductive. The smell of molasses permeated the building as the child figures melted in the sun shining in through the high factory windows. The children, cast from brown sugar or coated in molasses, were treated as candies; children who visited the work were observed licking them.²⁶ The woman's body, with its exposed vulva, was presented as an enormous sweet, and the audience was seduced: audience members were observed, photographed and recorded sticking out their tongues as though to lick the vulva, sticking out their hands as though to grasp it.²⁷ The audience, then, participated in manifesting disrespect for the Black woman. The fact that sugar was included in the work, then, contributes to the work's meaning in multiple ways.

To return to the question of the artist's intention and how it is relevant to inclusion content: when Walker gives the work a title and inserts other cues within the work that point us toward particular aspects of inclusion content – in this case, the historical and economic entanglements of sugar in a system of racialized oppression – we must take that up. There is no adequate reading of the work that neglects these elements in favor of restricting our attention to more general, ahistorical understandings of what sugar signifies.

When it comes Willie Cole's works like *Shine* that are constructed of shoes, the picture is a bit different, since the shoes themselves are whole objects with a specific

history of use that predates the artist's creative act. Cole speaks, in interviews and artist's statements, of the fact that these shoes bear the sweat of their wearers: for instance, "With a shoe, you know a person was there because of the sweat on it."²⁸ This signals to us that the history of use of the shoes – which is also a history of their wearers – is an added layer of resonance beyond the form of the shoes or the fact that their function is to be worn. We are directed to think about these people, about the miles they walked, the days at work, the Sundays in church; about how the shoes came to have their scuffs and worn soles. And by way of the title, *Shine*, he further invites a connection to people who deliver shoeshines, who, in the US, have traditionally been Black men. It is meaningful to use shoes to construct a portrait of someone who is constrained by sociopolitical forces to maintain others' shoes.

While I hold that the artist has the power to steer us in the direction of relevant inclusion content, I also regard the artist's ability to cast off aspects of inclusion content as limited. John Chamberlain, who made many sculptures from crushed automotive metal, attempted to disavow resonances that audience members frequently bring to the work. He said, among other things, "Using car metal is fine, but the sculptures are not car crashes and they are not violent" and "Perhaps they appear violent to people, but I prefer not to think about that as much as I think about the poetics and the processes."²⁹ However, if readings having to do with violent physical forces are continually salient to viewers because of the way the materials reveal the influence of such forces, I do not regard the artist's words, however often repeated, as having the power to disengage, neutralize or counteract this aspect of inclusion content. When one includes non-standard objects or materials in an artwork, these are often, to use Edwards's words, "already

loaded” with resonances, some of which are intended or embraced while others are incidental or even regretted. They remain present, however, and are thus available for the interpreter to take up if they contribute to the most satisfying interpretation of the work.

This is in much the same way that a photograph may include both elements that the artist expressly selected and elements that simply came as part of the package, perhaps even contrary to what the artist would have preferred. The fact that an image was chosen *despite* a particular element is interesting to know and may inform how that element figures in our interpretation, but it certainly does not excise the element from the image or render it irrelevant. It is open to us to decide that, despite the artist’s preference, the element plays a significant role in the work’s meaning, either to the work’s credit or to its detriment. By accepting the element and presenting it as part of the work, even reluctantly, the artist has made it available to us as interpretable material. The same goes, I suggest, for inclusion content.

As with any interpretive element, it is possible to read too much into inclusion content. El Anatsui’s wall-hung sculptures are constructed of discarded liquor bottle tops, but to overemphasize readings having to do with alcohol to the exclusion of the aesthetic and conceptual inventiveness of Anatsui’s use of this physical substrate would be to overreach inclusion content and fail to do justice to the work. And Chamberlain, in insisting that his works “are not violent,” may have a fair point if some viewers neglect their many other expressive qualities, including playfulness and obstinacy. Artists cannot cancel salient associations of their materials by fiat; but they can, through their statements, direct our attention to elements they regard as more central to their project.

6. Inclusion content and exemplification

We have considered a number of examples of inclusion content and how it inflects artwork meaning. Now I'd like to connect these reflections to Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin's discussion of exemplification, which is the phenomenon whereby a work both *possesses* and *refers back to* one or more of its own properties (or to the associated predicate or label). Goodman gives the example of a tailor's swatch: the swatch possesses many properties, including size and shape, but insofar as it is functioning as a swatch, it exemplifies only the properties of the fabric of which it is serving as a sample, namely color and texture.³⁰ Catherine Elgin elaborates the idea of an object's referring to some of its own properties: "To highlight, underscore, display, or convey involves reference as well as instantiation. An item that at once refers to and instantiates a feature may be said to *exemplify* that feature."³¹ And, later: "An exemplar refers to certain of its properties: it exhibits them, highlights them, shows them forth, makes them manifest.... In highlighting some properties, an exemplar overshadows, marginalizes, or downplays others."³²

Exemplification is relative to use. A tailor's swatch normally exemplifies color and texture. However, it can be deployed to exemplify something it does not exemplify in typical uses, including the very property of being a tailor's swatch.³³ An exemplar does not exemplify all the properties it possesses, and may not even exemplify those that appear most conspicuous.³⁴ Exemplification, Elgin suggests, is a matter of "present[ing] features in a context contrived to render them salient."³⁵

In suggesting that we must grapple with the fact that *Self 2006* is made of blood and *A Subtlety* is made of sugar and molasses, I am suggesting that these works not only

possess but also highlight the properties of being made of blood, sugar, and so forth. The presentation of these works in a context where the materials are non-standard for art-making is such as to emphasize these properties and generate reference back to the associated labels or predicates such as ‘made of blood’ and ‘made of sugar’. The salience of materials is sometimes enhanced further through the work’s title, auxiliary artist’s statements, or the manner of listing the artistic medium. The medium of Ai Weiwei’s 2007 *Colored Vases* in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is listed as “Neolithic vases and industrial paint,”³⁶ thereby emphasizing the historical and cultural significance of the act of obscuring the vases’ surfaces.

Are these full-fledged cases of exemplification? Goodman claims, “An experience is exemplificational insofar as concerned with properties exemplified or expressed – i.e., properties possessed and shown forth – by a symbol, not merely things the symbol denotes.”³⁷ This suggests that any time we find ourselves focusing on properties a work not only possesses but highlights and refers back to, we are concerned with exemplification. However, elsewhere both Goodman and Elgin suggest that exemplification is a matter of something serving as a *sample* or providing epistemic access to things to which the same predicate applies, and it is not clear that works with inclusion content typically have these functions. Whereas a tailor’s swatch serves as a fabric sample, revealing the color and texture of the fabric, the function of Ai’s *Colored Vases* is not to show us what Neolithic vases are like.

However, the inclusion of real Neolithic vases does allow the work to exemplify something else: a relationship between contemporary and ancient cultural production. In dousing the vessels with industrial paint to make a new work, Ai exemplifies a set of

attitudes toward cultural heritage: neither avoidance and neglect nor slavish reverence, but a willingness to romp playfully through, appropriate, and distort cultural products of the past in order to create something new. The point of Edwards's use of barbed wire, likewise, is not to show us what barbed wire is like. However, it does allow his work to exemplify a form of engagement of art with its surrounding political and practical contexts: namely, acknowledgement and contemplation of these contexts, as opposed to treating them as irrelevant.

These relationships can be addressed by Ai's and Edwards's works because in highlighting the predicates *made of barbed wire* and *made of Neolithic vases*, the work exemplifies not only these very materials but also broader categories to which they belong: categories we might name, crudely, "practical objects used for violent political ends" and "products of cultural heritage." As Goodman acknowledges, "just which among its properties a thing exemplifies can often be hard to tell"³⁸; Elgin adds that exemplification requires interpretation³⁹ and is not restricted to what the artist may have intended⁴⁰. Thus, once we have noted the elevated salience of materials, we must do further work to determine what, precisely, is being exemplified and what ends the exemplified properties are serving. Because of the salience of barbed wire in an art-making context, Melvin Edwards's works both possess and underscore the property of being made from barbed wire. This activates a whole range of historical and cultural associations belonging to the material which become eligible for interpretation.

7. Inclusion, metaphorical exemplification, and expression

Goodman distinguishes literal from metaphorical exemplification:

A picture literally possesses a gray color, really belongs to the class of gray things; but only metaphorically does it possess sadness or belong to the class of things that feel sad.⁴¹

Elgin offers a number of examples: “[A]n experiment can metaphorically exemplify properties like power, elegance, panache, and promise; a painting, properties like electricity, balance, movement, and depth.”⁴² Narrative or representational works can metaphorically exemplify by way of representation or depiction: “*A Doll’s House* metaphorically exemplifies discontent; the figure in *Guernica*, grief.”⁴³ Goodman suggests that expression is a central aesthetic function of exemplification: “Not all exemplification is expression, but all expression is exemplification.”⁴⁴

I suggest that literal exemplification can serve as a vehicle for and heighten metaphorical exemplification. Zoe Leonard’s 1992-1997 work *Strange Fruit (for David)* literally exemplifies the predicate *made of fruit* in a way that is central to its content. Leonard, grieving the death from AIDS of her friend and fellow artist David Wojnarowicz, began gathering the peels of fruits that she and other friends had eaten. She used needle and thread to sew the pieces of peel back together, leaving the stitching quite visible. On some of the peels she added embellishments like zippers and buttons. To display the work, the reconstituted and decorated fruit peels are spread out in a seemingly random array on the gallery floor.⁴⁵

Some of the fruit-related content of the work could have been secured through mechanisms other than inclusion and exemplification. The work alludes, through both its materials and its title, to the song *Strange Fruit*, written by Abel Meeropol and first recorded by Billie Holiday, which poignantly deplores lynching and other forms of

racism; and it alludes to the use of the word ‘fruit’ as a pejorative term for gay men.⁴⁶ It also evokes theistic notions of the Garden of Eden and the Fall, whereby humans lost their privileged status through a choice to consume the forbidden fruit – often used as a metaphor for socially or religiously stigmatized sexual activity – and were condemned to earthly suffering. This complex of allusions invites us to contemplate the role of societal oppression in the AIDS epidemic.

Leonard could have secured such allusions by, say, making a painting that *depicts* fruit. But the choice to make the work out of actual fruit peels allows Leonard to secure the allusive content in a direct and powerful way. It also allows her work to literally exemplify the fruit’s degradation. Leonard’s artistic choices demonstrate that she understands exemplification as crucial to the work’s meaning. When the work was acquired by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, she initially explored aggressive conservation measures with the well-known conservator Christian Scheidemann. But as curator Ann Temkin writes,

Leonard surprised herself and found that she recoiled at Scheidemann's hard-won results. She realized that the appearance of decay was not enough for her, the metaphor of disappearance was insufficient... [T]he mere pretense of deterioration was no longer persuasive. Leonard set herself a criterion of honesty and rejected the twenty-five preserved pieces.⁴⁷

Leonard decided that it was essential to the work’s expressive power that it directly *embody* deterioration rather than only alluding to it: these acts have different communicative resonance.

Moreover, our knowledge that Leonard and her friends actually ate all of this fruit and collected the peels over a period of years, and that she painstakingly sewed them all back up again, may help us to see the work as an expression of grief and also, in the gesture of repairing and decorating the objects, of care for David. Both the nature of the materials and their history contribute to the work's meaning and its power to evoke responses in us as viewers.

The literal exemplification of decay activates a powerful metaphorical exemplification of mortality; the literal exemplification of hollow shells that have been futilely stitched back together, only to continue their process of disintegration, metaphorically exemplifies emotional emptiness, loss, and the persistence of grief.

8. Formal similarity and material difference

How does inclusion content differ from content generated by an object that merely *looks like* it is made from non-standard materials or incorporates objects?

While many of Willie Cole's works are constructed from actual shoes, he has also created several bronzes that resemble shoe constructions. *Downtown Goddess* (2012) is a standing female figure that appears to be constructed from shoes but is in fact cast in bronze in an edition of 7, each with a unique patina. *Sole Sitter* (2013) is a seated figure, also resembling a shoe construction, but cast in bronze at a greatly enlarged scale.

How, if at all, does the work change if it is not made from shoes? These works sculpturally represent shoes, while also sculpturally representing a human figure constructed of shoe-shaped forms. But they do not exemplify the property *made of shoes*. And the fact that they do not exemplify this property leaves out much of the inclusion

content of the original shoe-based works. As we noted earlier, Cole mentions the sweat in the actual shoes, and the power of the sweat to evoke the presence of the wearer. With these bronzes, however, there are no shoes, there is no sweat, there is no history of use. The sculptures allude to an earlier clever act of constructing a human figure out of shoes, but they do not directly manifest this act; bronze, after all, can be shaped into any form.

Generally speaking, the act of producing a trompe l'oeil or simulacrum has very different meanings than the act of presenting an original object. Ai Weiwei's 2010 work *Sunflower Seeds* was displayed by placing 100 million individually handpainted porcelain sunflower seeds in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern.⁴⁸ Among other things, ceramic seeds function differently than real seeds in meaning creation because of their very different potentialities for us: real sunflower seeds are edible, while ceramic seeds will not nourish and might break the teeth. Susanne Langer suggested that sculpture affects us by altering our experience of space, causing us to see it as organized by the kinetic possibilities we imagine for the sculptural object (even if we know it is not going to move).⁴⁹ Sculpture may also affect our experience by way of the possibilities we take the sculptural object to offer for us: and in that case, blood, chocolate, soap and sunflower seeds, by activating our imaginative bodily responses, make very different contributions to our experience than even very realistic simulacra would do.

This supposition of interaction, I suggest further, is not far-fetched: people regularly have physical interactions with sculptural objects, even where those interactions are forbidden. As mentioned earlier, children were observed licking the child figures of Kara Walker's *A Subtlety*, and adults were observed and photographed sticking out their tongues as though to lick the female figure's vulva. Walker's 2014 video *An Audience*

also captures more respectful interactions, such as gentle caresses of the sugar surface.⁵⁰ Likewise, Janine Antoni has told me that people periodically bite the large chocolate cube in her work *Gnaw*, and conservation intervention has been required to repair the work. This is made less surprising by the fact that some contemporary artworks allow such interaction: eating the candies of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's works is permitted. As contemporary art expands our opportunities to interact directly with sculptural objects, even up to the point of consuming them, it stands to reason that the potential for interaction with these objects will loom ever larger in the meanings we attribute to sculptural works.

9. Conclusion

I have argued that the incorporation of non-standard art-making materials and whole objects within a sculptural work contributes to the work's content in multiple ways. Material is literally part of the content of the work and contributes elements like color, texture, and sometimes shape to the work's visual content. We saw in section 3 that material may inflect *what* the work represents – which qualities we are to attribute to the represented subject – or *how* the subject is represented in a stylistic sense. As we observed in section 4 as well as in examples throughout, material contributes to the expressive content of the work in ways that are independent of sculptural representation: material can bring in salient cultural and historical associations that contribute to the meanings we rightly attribute to the work in interpretation. As we discussed in section 5, artists have some ability, through titling and auxiliary statements, to steer which properties are exemplified and how these contribute to the work's expressive content.

However, the artist's ability to cancel out aspects of inclusion content that are salient to the viewer is limited.

As we saw in sections 6 and 7, one of the mechanisms through which inclusion content functions is exemplification. By exemplifying the property of being made from various kinds of sugar, Kara Walker's *A Subtlety* activates associations related to the historical production process and cultural resonances of sugar. In addition, as discussed in section 8, we are aware of the possibilities for interaction afforded by the materials and objects composing the work, even if we never intend to act upon these possibilities. The fact that a sculptural object is really made from frozen blood or chocolate activates our understanding of the object's potential in relation to our own bodies, which contributes to the work's expressive content.

To return to the example with which we began, Melvin Edwards's minimalist constructions do not merely possess but also exemplify the property of being made from barbed wire. This is because barbed wire is salient in a context where most artists, especially those working in a minimalist idiom, have been working with either standard artmaking materials or more neutral non-art materials. The salience of the material is heightened by our bodily and imaginative responses to the barbed wire. Through their literal exemplification of barbed wire, the works metaphorically exemplify structures implicated in practical containment (as in ranching) and oppressive confinement (as in Nazi concentration camps). These forms of exemplification facilitate expressive content, allowing the works to raise questions about the relationship between art and social context and about the responsibilities of artists to address that context in their work.

Through this discussion, I hope to have established that materials themselves, as much as the forms they are used to construct, make direct contributions to artistic themes and meanings. This is particularly true in a contemporary art context where many works are made from non-standard materials that have salient cultural and historical resonances and activate our awareness of their potential for physical interaction with our own bodies. While the meaningfulness of materials is a familiar and even banal fact for artists and critics, I hope this philosophical analysis sheds light on the kinds of content materials can contribute to and the mechanisms through which this contribution occurs.⁵¹

¹ Edwards as quoted in Catherine Craft, “Barbed Abstraction,” *Art in America*, January 2014, 75.

² Kellie Jones, “Interview with David Hammons,” in Jones, *Eyeminded* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 249.

³ Catherine Craft, *Melvin Edwards: Five Decades* (Dallas: Nasher Sculpture Center, 2015), 41.

⁴ Michael Brenson, “Melvin Edwards,” *Bomb*, November 24, 2014, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/melvin-edwards/>.

⁵ For recent overviews, see Ben Blumson, *Resemblance and Representation: An Essay in the Philosophy of Pictures* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2017); John Hyman and Katerina Bantinaki, “Depiction,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta, June 8, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/depiction/>.

⁶ See, e.g., Robert Hopkins, “Painting, Sculpture, Sight, and Touch,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 44 (2004): 149-66; Robert Hopkins, “Sculpture and Perspective,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50 (2010): 357-373.

⁷ I am grateful to Dominic McIver Lopes for this point.

⁸ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1976); Catherine Elgin, “Understanding: Art and Science,” *Synthese* 95 (1993): 13-28; Catherine Elgin, “Making Manifest: The Role of Exemplification in the Sciences and the Arts,” *Principia* 15 (2011): 399-413.

⁹ Glenda Carpio, “On the Whiteness of Kara Walker’s *Marvelous Sugar Baby*,” *ASAP/Journal* 2 (2017): 551-2.

¹⁰ “Gnaw,” Janine Antoni, accessed June 7, 2019, <http://www.janineantoni.net/gnaw>.

¹¹ “Marc Quinn (‘Self’),” National Portrait Gallery, accessed June 7, 2019, <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw138260/Marc-Quinn-Self>.

¹² Garth Clark, “Dropping the Urn (Ceramic Works, 5000 BCE – 2010CE),” *Art Asia Pacific*, October 10, 2010,

<http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/70/AiWeiweiDroppingTheUrnCeramicWorks5000BCE2010CE>.

¹³ “Ai Weiwei,” Guggenheim, last modified January 24, 2018,

<https://www.guggenheim.org/arts-curriculum/topic/ai-weiwei>.

¹⁴ “Zhan Wang: Urban Landscape,” Williams College Museum of Art, accessed June 7, 2019, <https://wcma.williams.edu/zhan-wang-urban-landscape/>.

¹⁵ “Shine, 2007,” Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed June 7, 2019,

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/495572>.

¹⁶ “Strange Fruit, Zoe Leonard,” Philadelphia Museum of Art, accessed June 7, 2019,

<https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/92277.html>. For discussion, see Ann Temkin, “Strange Fruit,” in *Mortality Immortality? The Legacy of 20th-Century Art*, ed. Miguel Angel Corzo (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1999), 45-50. and Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 143-47.

¹⁷ Susan Vogel, *El Anatsui: Art and Life* (Munich: Prestel, 2012), 74-5.

¹⁸ “Felix Gonzalez-Torres “Untitled” (Placebo), 1991,” MoMA, accessed June 7, 2019,

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80932>.

¹⁹ ““Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.),” The Art Institute of Chicago, accessed June 7, 2019,

<https://www.artic.edu/artworks/152961/untitled-portrait-of-ross-in-l-a>. The orthography of the work titles, with quotation marks around “Untitled” and no italics, is in accordance with the artist’s preferences as indicated in correspondence with the Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation.

²⁰ “Untitled (Pins), 2004 Tara Donovan,” Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed June 7, 2019,

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/498735>.

²¹ Cf. John Dilworth, “A Double Content Theory of Artistic Representation,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63 (2005): 249-60; John Dilworth, *The Double Content of Art* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005).

²² Kara L. Rooney, “A Sonorous Subtlety: Kara Walker with Kara Rooney,” *Brooklyn Rail*, May 6, 2014,

<https://brooklynrail.org/2014/05/art/kara-walker-with-kara-rooney>.

²³ True story: *Self 1991*, the first bust, partly melted when the freezer in which it was stored was unplugged during a kitchen renovation. “Blood Sculpture ‘melted,’” *BBC News*, July 4, 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/2093053.stm>.

²⁴ Nato Thompson, “Curatorial Statement - Kara Walker,” Creative Time, accessed June 7, 2019,

<http://creativetime.org/projects/karawalker/curatorial-statement/>.

²⁵ See Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* for a comprehensive discussion of this history and its pernicious ongoing effects. See Maria del Guadalupe Davidson, “Black Silhouettes on White Walls: Kara Walker’s Magic Lantern,” in *Body Aesthetics*, ed. Sherri Irvin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 32-34, for discussion of these issues in relation to Walker’s *A Subtlety*.

²⁶ Stephanye Watts offers an account in “The Audacity of No Chill: Kara Walker in the Instagram Capital,” *Gawker*, June 04, 2014,

<https://gawker.com/the-audacity-of-no-chill-kara-walker-in-the-instagram-1585944103>.

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- ²⁷ See, e.g., the accounts by Elizabeth Chin and Dána-Ain Davis in Doug Reeser, "Reflections on Kara Walker's 'A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby,'" *AnthroNOW*, July 24, 2014, <http://anthronow.com/reach/reflections-on-kara-walkers-a-subtlety-or-the-marvelous-sugar-baby>.
- ²⁸ Benjamin Genocchio and Tammy La Gorce, "From Newark to ... Montclair," *New York Times*, March 12, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/12/nyregion/nyregionspecial2/from-newark-to-montclair.html>.
- ²⁹ Julie Sylvester, *John Chamberlain: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Sculpture 1954–1985* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1986), 18.
- ³⁰ Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 53.
- ³¹ Elgin, "Understanding," 15.
- ³² Elgin, "Making Manifest," 400.
- ³³ Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 53.
- ³⁴ Elgin, "Making Manifest," 401.
- ³⁵ Elgin, "Understanding," 17.
- ³⁶ "Ai Weiwei, Colored Vases, 2007 SFMOMA," SFMOMA, accessed June 7, 2019, <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/2016.75.1-10/>.
- ³⁷ Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 253.
- ³⁸ Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 66.
- ³⁹ Elgin, "Understanding," 18.
- ⁴⁰ Elgin, "Understanding," 19.
- ⁴¹ Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 50-51.
- ⁴² Elgin, "Understanding," 16.
- ⁴³ Elgin, "Understanding," 24.
- ⁴⁴ Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 52.
- ⁴⁵ Temkin, "Strange Fruit."
- ⁴⁶ Buskirk, *Contingent Object*, 143-47.
- ⁴⁷ Temkin, "Strange Fruit," 47.
- ⁴⁸ "The Unilever Series: Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds," Tate, last modified October 22, 2010, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series/unilever-series-ai-weiwei-sunflower-seeds>.
- ⁴⁹ Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953).
- ⁵⁰ "Kara Walker – An Audience (trailer)," Sikkema Jenkins & Co., accessed June 8, 2019, <https://vimeo.com/112396045>.
- ⁵¹ I am grateful to Stephanie Holt for research assistance; to the artists for permission to reproduce their works; to Kristin Gjesdal, Fred Rush and Ingvild Torsen for the kind invitation to contribute to this volume and to Ingvild for helpful feedback; to participants at the 2016 Oslo conference on Contemporary and Historical Problems in the Aesthetics of Sculpture and the 2018 Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics for helpful discussion; and to Karen Gover for comments at the ASA meeting. I am also grateful for a University of Oklahoma Humanities Forum Fellowship that facilitated this research.