

The Expressive Import of Degradation and Decay in Contemporary Art
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While new media artists play in the fourth dimension by creating technology-based works whose content unfolds over time, many artists of object-based works play in the fourth dimension by creating works designated for degradation or decay. Decay is, after all, one of the most fruitful processes of continual evolution that one can readily set in motion for an object-based work. There is, of course, a long tradition of artists representing or alluding to decay in visual artworks. But what is the distinctive expressive import of creating a work whose very substance is destined for dilapidation or collapse?

I'll begin by introducing the philosophical concept of *exemplification*, as discussed by Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin, and its implication that actual decay – not just depicted or simulated decay – might have particular expressive power. While Goodman and Elgin hold that exemplification is expressive, they say little about the psychological or phenomenological mechanisms that account for its distinctive expressive power. Attending to the bodily and emotional effects that decaying materials and structures have on us helps to explain the distinctive expressive power of these works.

1. Exemplification

Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin discuss *exemplification*, which is the situation in which an object both *possesses* a feature and *refers back to* that very feature. Goodman gives the example of a tailor's swatch: the swatch shows us the nature of the fabric it exemplifies by referring back to its own color and texture. While the swatch also possesses other features, such as size and shape, it does not refer back to those features. The size of the swatch is not exemplified; it is merely incidental, giving us no insight into what the fabric is like.¹ Exemplification is a key expressive resource: as Goodman says, "Not all exemplification is expression, but all expression is exemplification."²

Elgin explains what is involved in an object's referring back to its own properties. "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."³ And, elsewhere: "To highlight, underscore, display, or convey involves reference as well as instantiation. An item that at once refers to and instantiates a feature may

¹ Goodman, *Languages*, 53.

² Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1976), 52.

³ Catherine Z. Elgin, "Making Manifest: The Role of Exemplification in the Sciences and the Arts," *Principia: An International Journal of Epistemology* 15 no. 3 (December 2011): 400.

be said to *exemplify* that feature.”⁴ How does the item *refer to* its own features? By “present[ing] features in a context contrived to render them salient.”⁵ This can happen in more than one way. Some properties are salient because the context of use mandates our attention to them. Color and texture are salient for the tailor’s swatch, while shape and size are not, because the swatch has a known function that involves revealing the former qualities and not the latter. The painted surface of an oil painting is salient, while the oil-stained reverse (however aesthetically interesting) is not, because of established expectations relative to the art form of painting. Properties can also become salient, naturally attracting our attention, because they are surprising or unexpected in a context. Seurat’s pointillism and Rauschenberg’s incorporation of three-dimensional non-art objects into his painted combines are salient because they distinguish these artists’ works from their precursors in the art form of painting. There are, then, at least two quite different paths to exemplification: features may be salient because the expectations relevant to the context direct us to attend to them or because they stand out as unexpected and thereby naturally attract our attention.

Exemplification is relative to use. While a tailor’s swatch normally exemplifies color and texture but not size or shape, it can be deployed to exemplify something it does not exemplify in typical uses, including the very property of being a tailor’s swatch.⁶ And in contexts where it exemplifies that property, it will also exemplify its own size and shape, since these properties are relevant to our understanding of what a tailor’s swatch is like. An exemplar does not exemplify all the properties it possesses and may not exemplify those that appear most conspicuous, if the context conveys to us that these are not the ones most relevant given the current use.⁷

Zoe Leonard’s *Strange Fruit (For David)* (1992-1997, collection Philadelphia Museum of Art) exemplifies the property of being made from real fruit peels. This property is not merely possessed by the work but is highly salient in an art context, where the inclusion of unstable organic materials is not only historically uncommon but poses a notorious challenge from a conservation standpoint.⁸ The decay of the materials is also perceptibly salient: the objects are visibly subject to ongoing forces that have resulted in darkening, drying, shrinking, shriveling and breakage. We can thus say that the work not only possesses but exemplifies the property of being in a state of decay.

Leonard could have represented or alluded to decaying fruit through a conventional artmaking practice that would have been far less unwieldy for the context of a collecting institution – a still life painting, say, or a realistic sculpture made from traditional artmaking materials.

⁴ Catherine Z. Elgin, “Understanding: Art and Science,” *Synthese* 95, no. 1 (April 1993): 15.

⁵ Elgin, “Understanding,” 17.

⁶ Goodman, *Languages*, 50-51.

⁷ Elgin, “Making Manifest,” 401.

⁸ Glenn Wharton, “The Challenges of Conserving Contemporary Art,” in *Collecting the New: Museums and Contemporary Art*, ed. Bruce Altshuler (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 163-178.

Instead, she chose to make a work that directly incorporates decaying fruit, thereby exemplifying them. What is the expressive import of this choice?

One part of the answer lies in the concept of *metaphorical* exemplification. When a work literally exemplifies a certain property, this may make it especially apt to metaphorically exemplify further properties in a way that we experience as expressive. Goodman notes that a work may metaphorically exemplify properties it does not literally possess: “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.”⁹ Elgin offers further examples: “[A]n experiment can metaphorically exemplify properties like power, elegance, panache, and promise; a painting, properties like electricity, balance, movement, and depth.”¹⁰ Narrative or representational works can metaphorically exemplify by way of what they literally represent or depict: “*A Doll’s House* metaphorically exemplifies discontent; the figure in *Guernica*, grief.”¹¹ *Guernica* represents people who are visibly in the throes of violent terror and grief; the marked salience of the states we are led to attribute to the characters leads Goodman to conclude that these states themselves are metaphorically exemplified by the work. The exemplification is metaphorical because the work does not *literally* possess the property of grief: a painting cannot grieve.

As Elgin’s examples of painting imply, metaphorical exemplification may be secured through means other than representation. It appears, from the examples, that if a painting tends to give us a strong impression of or call to mind properties like movement and depth, these properties should be understood as metaphorically exemplified. I suggest that for contemporary object-based works, metaphorical exemplification is often fed by literal exemplification: the properties a work literally exemplifies – such as being made of certain materials – call to our minds properties that are metaphorically exemplified by the work.

Artists can make additional choices, beyond simply including materials in their works, that boost the salience of the materials or their states of decay, thereby shaping what the work exemplifies both literally and metaphorically. To understand this, let us look more closely at Leonard’s *Strange Fruit (for David)*. 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.

Strange Fruit literally exemplifies the property of being made of fruit in a way that is central to its content. Leonard’s work alludes, through both its materials and its title, to the song *Strange Fruit*, written by Abel Meeropol and first recorded in 1939 by Billie Holiday, which poignantly

⁹ Goodman, *Languages*, 53.

¹⁰ Elgin, “Understanding,” 16.

¹¹ Elgin, “Understanding,” 24.

deplores lynching and other forms of racism; and it alludes to the use of the word ‘fruit’ as a pejorative term for gay men. 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 decaying 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, which she understands as crucial to its 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 Ann Temkin, the curator responsible for the work’s acquisition, 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.¹²

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.

In prohibiting aggressive conservation measures for *Strange Fruit*, Leonard increased the salience of the fruit’s decay.¹³ When a literally exemplified property is made highly salient in this way, its potential for metaphorical exemplification is similarly heightened.

Bodily, Imaginative and Emotional Responses

We now have the concept of exemplification in our repertoire. But is it really explanatory? Why does the actual presence of a material or property in the work have power that a depiction or simulation does not? If Leonard’s decaying fruit peels are deployed in service of a metaphor, why couldn’t that metaphor be activated just as effectively by, say, a vanitas painting?

The special powers of the fabric swatch are epistemic: the swatch shows us in detail what the fabric is like, including its weave, drape, transparency, and feel on the skin. But Zoe Leonard

¹² Ann Temkin, “*Strange Fruit*,” in *Mortality, Immortality? The Legacy of 20th Century Art*, ed. Miguel Angel Corzo (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1999), 47.

¹³ I regard establishing rules governing the conservation of their works as part of the artist’s prerogative in determining the work’s nature and boundaries. However, the extent to which such rules are binding on the institution is controversial, and there are circumstances in which violating them is justified. I discuss related issues in “Authenticity, Misunderstanding, and Institutional Responsibility in Contemporary Art,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 59, no. 3 (2019): 273-288.

does not give us a sample of fruit peels in order to show us what fruit peels are like. The power is expressive, not epistemic; and this seems to require some explanation.

To answer, I'd like to bring together some reflections by Susanne Langer from the middle of the twentieth century. Langer suggested that we tend to understand space as organized by our kinetic possibilities within it. When a sculpture is present in the space, we see the space as organized by the kinetic possibilities we imagine for the sculptural object (even if we know it is not going to move), and this changes how we experience the space. She describes sculpture as "*virtual kinetic volume*"¹⁴ and suggests that the sculpture's implied kinetic nature tends to activate a connection between vision and touch. She says:

The intimate relationship between touch and sight which is thus effected by the semblance of kinetic volume explains some of the complex sensory reactions which sculptors as well as laymen often have toward it. Many people feel a strong desire to handle every figure. [Some] imagine the touch of stone or wood, metal or earth; they wish to feel the substance that is really there, and let their hands pass over its pure form.¹⁵

Langer's suggestion recalls remarks by Johann Gottfried Herder in the 18th century. Herder holds that we use vision as a substitute for touch in our apprehension of sculpture: the eye is guided to seek out the information that the hand desires. He suggests that the beauty of three-dimensional forms, and the pleasure they occasion, belong to touch: the form is felt (perhaps imaginatively), not seen, as beautiful.¹⁶

Langer invokes several interrelated processes. First, the presence of sculpture affects the way I experience space to be organized. Second, I have imaginative bodily experiences of what it would be like to touch the sculpture (and as we know from recent scientific findings, imaginative bodily experiences do indeed involve bodily, not merely mental, activation).¹⁷ Third, I have longings associated with the sculpture. So the sculpture is entering my consciousness cognitively, imaginatively, emotionally, and somatically.

Langer argues further that imagination has a profound role both in shaping our perceptions of the world and in constituting our emotional lives. She says:

It is sensation remembered and anticipated, feared or sought or even imagined and eschewed that is important in human life. It is perception molded by imagination that

¹⁴ Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 89.

¹⁵ Langer, *Feeling*, 90.

¹⁶ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative Dream*, trans. Jason Gaiger (University of Chicago Press, 2002). For discussion, see Rachel Zuckert, "Sculpture and Touch: Herder's Aesthetics of Sculpture," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 285-299.

¹⁷ E.g., Luciano Fadiga, Leonardo Fogassi, Giovanni Pavesi, and Giacomo Rizzolatti, "Motor Facilitation During Action Observation: A Magnetic Stimulation Study," *Journal of Neurophysiology* 73, no. 6 (1995): 2608-2611.

gives us the outward world we know. And it is the continuity of thought that systematizes our emotional reactions into attitudes with distinct feeling tones, and sets a certain scope for an individual's passions. In other words: by virtue of our thought and imagination we have not only feelings, but a *life of feeling*.¹⁸

I suggest that these various insights, brought together, help to explain how the actual presence of certain materials, including their actual or potential states of decay, has distinctive expressive power. The sculptural object has real physical potential, and thus offers real possibilities for us. Materials configured sculpturally reorganize our sense of possibility, spark imaginative bodily engagement, disturb us and ignite our longings.

To see how these phenomena elevate the expressive potential associated with decaying materials, let us consider some examples. For his self-portrait busts, an ongoing series that began in 1991, Marc Quinn takes a direct cast of his head. Then he creates a mold that he fills with his own blood. The work is completed through a process of freezing.¹⁹

Now, blood is a liquid, and it has the natural tendencies of a liquid, to dissipate if uncontained. These tendencies lend themselves adequately to drawing or inscription²⁰ – coagulation notwithstanding – but less well to sculpture. Quinn's process wryly mimics what we do with bronze: render it temporarily liquid for casting, knowing that it will return to a highly durable solidity as it cools. Quinn, instead, uses the natural liquidity of blood and then suspends it in a solid state.

When we encounter the work, we know that this is wrong. The wrongness of it, the potential liquidity which is also the possibility of a bloodbath, of the artist's head dissolving into a pool of blood – this is present to us. Our knowledge that the object is constituted of frozen blood makes it hum with the potential of disaster. You can feel this even if you aren't aware that one of the works in this series may have been destroyed when power to the refrigeration unit was mistakenly shut off;²¹ even if you aren't thinking about the grisly failures of early attempts to

¹⁸ Langer, *Feeling*, 372.

¹⁹ "Marc Quinn ('Self')," National Portrait Gallery, accessed June 7, 2019, <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw138260/Marc-Quinn-Self>. Quinn made works in the series every five years from 1991 to 2011 but does not appear to have made one in 2016.

²⁰ Jimmy Yu, "Blood Writing as Extraordinary Artifact and Agent for Socioreligious Change," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7, no. 1 (2020): 1-9.

²¹ "Blood Sculpture 'Melted,'" *BBC News*, July 4, 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/2093053.stm>. Quinn has reportedly refused to comment on whether the work, *Self 1991*, was subsequently remade. Arifa Akbar, "National Portrait Gallery Acquires Marc Quinn's Bloody Head," *The Independent*, September 10, 2009, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/national-portrait-gallery-acquires-marc-quinns-bloody-head-1785133.html>.

cryogenically preserve human bodies for future revival.²² We humans aren't very good at keeping things frozen; even our icebergs are melting.

Also present to us is the object's current actual state: the coldness, solidity and ghastliness of this strangely shaped blood popsicle. And then there is our further contemplation of the blood itself. The large quantity of the artist's blood would have been medically removed over an extended period: in fact, the quantity of blood in each of these busts, ten pints, is about the same as the total quantity of blood present in an adult human body at a given 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. Blood records what we've been up to, as Quinn, who has a history of alcoholism, would be acutely aware.²³ Blood can prompt squeamishness, unease, and for good reason: contact with others' blood can be dangerous. Of course, by freezing the blood and putting it in a vitrine, Quinn confuses these reactions a bit: the blood is, for the moment, safely contained.

There is thus a duality to our encounter with this work: even while it is present to us as a solid object, clinically frozen, its potential for decay and loss animates our emotions and our bodily imaginings. It matters that the work is actually made of blood and actually has the potential to melt, which we feel and experience as potential not only for it but for us.

The power of Quinn's work rests partly in the fact that it exemplifies both the very substance of the artist's person and exquisitely fine detail of the topography of his skin and features. It evokes a particular moment in Quinn's life by virtue of what it shows about his age but even more by revealing aspects of the casting process, such as the pressure placed on the skin and material clumped in the eyelashes. We see the variability of color and surface texture of frozen blood, but also the signs of a body being impinged upon in very specific ways.

Goodman says that "all expression is exemplification." How does what this work exemplifies, both literally and metaphorically, connect to its expressive power? Quinn refers to these works as being "on life support": by literally exemplifying the potential to melt and a technological support to resist this potential, they metaphorically exemplify the precarity of human life and our heroic efforts to sustain it.²⁴ The metaphor has its power not merely by showing us the fine features of something, a function that could be served as well by a realistic simulacrum. Our knowledge of the presence of the artist's real blood, tenuously suspended in a solid state, activates a whole sequence of bodily imaginings and emotional responses having to do with bodily injury, disease, and mortality. The object invites a sort of squeamish fascination, helping us quiet any disgust response through the presentation of a frozen object clinically sealed off. These bodily and emotional responses are what activate the expressive energy of the metaphor of a temporary marvel of self-preservation and its inevitable failure.

²² Bob Nelson, *Freezing People Is (Not) Easy* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2014).

²³ "Ephemeral works (on life support)," Marc Quinn, accessed September 29, 2020, <http://marcquinn.com/artworks/ephemeral-works-on-life-support>.

²⁴ "Ephemeral works (on life support)."

We may turn now to Kara Walker's 2014 work *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*. This work, like Quinn's, has a pronounced duality: it was simultaneously present to us as a magnificent monument and as an impending ruin. The fact that the building in which it was displayed was soon to be demolished is signaled in the title. The grand sphinx figure is made with a surface of white sugar, which is soluble, and the object is described as a subtlety, which is traditionally a small sugar sculpture designed to be eaten. But most markedly, the child worker figures, some cast in brown sugar and others cast in resin and coated in molasses, were collapsing before our eyes.²⁵ The visible disintegration, along with the associated smell, heightened the sense of ephemerality, of impending loss. And this activated a variety of bodily, emotional and imaginative responses.

The most widely publicized reactions were disrespectful and exploitative, objectifying the Black female body in ways that hark back to the sexual violence against Black women that was used to produce a labor force to create wealth for whites.²⁶ But other forms of longing and bodily engagement were in play as well. Children were seen playing with and even licking the child laborer figures.²⁷ Walker had video shot of audience engagement with the work, and these showed that some treated the sphinx figure with gentle, reverent caresses.²⁸ While there were signs indicated that touching of the work is prohibited, the knowledge and visible signs of the work's degradation and eventual destruction may have helped to disable this prohibition and allow people to feel more fully justified in indulging their longings and the work's physical allure.²⁹ Why not appreciate engagement with the work fully, given that there was no chance of the objects' long-term preservation, and that there would be no opportunity to return for further encounters in later years?

Most of us, of course, did not lick the objects or dip our hands into the syrupy goo puddled on the floor. But the signs of loss and disintegration nonetheless heighten our sensory imaginings of texture, viscosity and sweetness. Our actual visual perception of the objects is, as Langer

²⁵ Glenda Carpio, "On the Whiteness of Kara Walker's *Marvelous Sugar Baby*," *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 3 (2017): 551-2.

²⁶ 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>.

²⁷ Stephanye Watts, "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>.

²⁸ "Kara Walker – An Audience (trailer)," Sikkema Jenkins & Co., accessed June 8, 2019, <https://vimeo.com/112396045>.

²⁹ It is worth noting, however, that audience members violating the prohibition on touching artworks in museum collections is a frequent occurrence, as conservation records attest.

suggested, “molded by the imagination,” connecting to both embodied desire and emotional passion. The literal exemplification of specific materials yielding visual and olfactory signs of their deterioration, paired with the literal exemplification of impending destruction, activates a metaphor of the fragility and preciousness of our beings, the power we have over each other, the tragedy of disrespect and disregard. And the knowledge that the site will be literally bulldozed may activate the wistful metaphoric imagining of a prospect of transforming the entire system of white supremacy into a ruin.

A simulacrum, of course, also engages imagination and emotion, but not in the same way. The potentialities that we know it to offer for us are different. Consider Ai Weiwei’s 2010 work *Sunflower Seeds*, which was displayed by placing 100 million individually hand-painted porcelain sunflower seeds in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern in 2010-2011.³⁰ Ceramic seeds function differently than real seeds in our experience because of their very different potentialities for us: real sunflower seeds are edible, while ceramic seeds will not nourish and might break the teeth. The work really does show us what sunflower seeds are like – it exemplifies their external color and morphology, though not their other material qualities. Precisely through this careful simulation, which is a form of selective exemplification, the work activates our bodily imaginings associated with an experience of chewing and eating while placing them in collision with the other qualities it exemplifies.

Another instructive contrast is between items directly included in a work and items photographically depicted. Sam Taylor-Johnson’s *Still Life* (2001, collection Museum of Fine Arts Boston) is a remarkable time-lapse film, lasting nearly four minutes, of a bowl of decomposing fruit.³¹ For almost the first minute, little appears to happen; but then some of the fruit visibly shifts position almost as if alive, and not long afterwards a dramatic bloom of mold begins, other fruits move, and rotten spots begin to emerge and spread. After first expanding outward in a greenish fuzz, the mold and the objects beneath it begin to collapse, gradually shifting toward a darkening gray invaded by spots of opaque white, as a haze of mold creeps onto the bowl rim and surrounding table. Things seem stable for a while, until the scene is animated by the movement of flies and other insects as parts of the fruit darken to black.

The objects shown, though not the film itself, exemplify florid states of decay. As with the tailor’s swatch, part of the value of exemplification here is epistemic: the work shows us the unfolding of processes we may know little about, since we go to considerable pains to prevent

³⁰ “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>. Further information about the work’s production, exhibition history, and related works is available at “Ai Weiwei Sunflower Seeds,” Faurchou Foundation, accessed October 8, 2020, <https://www.aiweiweiseeds.com/>.

³¹ “Still Life, Sam Taylor-Johnson,” Museum of Fine Arts Boston, accessed October 8, 2020, <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/518595>. A video of the work is available to watch on the artist’s web site, accessed October 8, 2020, <https://samtaylorjohnson.com/>. I am grateful to Ivan Gaskell for suggesting discussion of this work.

anything like this happening in our living spaces. In addition, the work certainly evokes emotions and bodily imaginings: to my mind, it resembles a naturalistic short horror film, pinning me in place with fascination even as I experience a welling up of physical disgust. I even imagine the smell of the rotting fruit, until things have progressed to the point where I no longer know what to imagine.

At the same time, this decay has no real bodily potential for me. The objects and events that fascinate me are not present in my space; the features of interest are not exemplified by the work itself. The smell remains purely hypothetical. I can watch the film as many times as I like, and things always unfold exactly the same way; the remains of those fruits are long discarded. What I have access to is only a record, not the things themselves. While the blood of Marc Quinn's self-portraits is clinically separated from us by freezing and containment, it is still *right there*. There is thus an immediacy to how it encroaches on my sensibilities, in contrast to the detachment fostered by technological reproduction.

Artists use unconventional materials expressively, and they set in motion states of disintegration and decay for expressive purposes. Goodman and Elgin give us some resources to account for this when they discuss exemplification as a process whereby a work can render salient some of its own characteristics, thereby signaling that we are to take them seriously. These characteristics, once highlighted, can then be deployed to metaphorical ends.

But to complete the explanation of why literal exemplification – the actual inclusion and salience of decaying materials – has expressive significance that differs from that of depiction or simulation, we must look to further experiential phenomena. Sculptural materials have potential that we feel as potential for ourselves; we have embodied and emotional reactions to them, sometimes only felt and sometimes acted upon. Actual states of decay may alter our sense of the prohibitions associated with contact, as they undermine any illusion of an untouchable object preserved for posterity. And our awareness of fragility, even in an object not yet exhibiting decay, creates a duality in our experience, with the object present to our senses even as its degraded state lurks in our imaginations.

Let us return briefly to Leonard's *Strange Fruit (for David)*. 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 emptiness, loss, and the persistence of grief. The activation of these metaphors is emotional and embodied: 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, activates our embodied awareness of eating, handling, and acts of care. The decay of the objects constitutes real loss, not merely loss alluded to. We know and feel that we are encountering the transitory: the transitory genuinely

present to us, genuinely exemplified. The presence of real decaying objects activates our bodily, imaginative and emotional responses, and this explains the metaphor's expressive power.³²

³² I am grateful to the Bard Graduate Center for the invitation to present an earlier version of this work in 2019 and to A. W. Eaton and Ivan Gaskell for helpful comments and discussion.