

Review Essay

What Might a Materialist Approach to Art Look Like?

Color, Facture, Art, and Design: Artistic Technique and the Precision of Human Perception.
By Iona Singh. Zero Books, 2012.

This is an always interesting, sometime vexatious, and possibly quite important book with an unfortunate title. Unfortunate, because the unwieldy moniker is likely to confuse many readers who might otherwise have been attracted to the subject matter in this book. In my opinion, a much better title might have been: *A Materialist Approach to Understanding Art*, or perhaps even *Knowing Art Through a Materialist Lens*. The goal of the author, Iona Singh, is nothing less than to take an uncompromisingly materialist approach to art in order to create the tools necessary for a radical critique of standard forms of art criticism. In order to inform her position, the author draws extensively on the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Walter Benjamin, Louis Althusser, Frederick Jameson, Pierre Bourdieu, and Gary Tedman. Her quest is personal as well as professional. She begins the book by asking, a little plaintively, what a person is to do if she loves art (having been an artist herself) but is concerned that this affection might place her on the wrong side of the class struggle (p. 1). Eventually, she tells us, she arrives at the conclusion that: “Yes I think these paintings are worth something, are beautiful and rare” (p. 1). In this, she suggests that specific works of art provide the opportunity for human beings to experience something meaningful through them and with them. That is, all contemporary art in the period of capitalism is not necessarily doomed to be labeled ‘bourgeois’ and dismissed by serious leftists, despite the propensity that most art galleries and museums have for erasing all signs of labour when they present art products. The

book seems to be, in a way, the intellectual journey Singh took to eventually arrive at this conclusion.

Since ‘facture’ is featured so prominently in the title and is likely unfamiliar to many readers, it might be useful to begin with this idea. As stated by Singh: “The combination of materials used generatively to convey color and the affect they have on the canvas is known by the term ‘facture’” (p. 46). This sentence almost makes it seem as though the material arranges itself on the canvas, but of course facture includes how the artist handles the paint or other materials involved in the production of art works and it also includes this process as more generally applied to other kinds of work. One of Singh’s key concerns in this book is what she sees as the historical alienation of artists from the means of production. She notes, for example, “Under the contemporary conditions of artistic production, however, the process of the transformation of art materials from nature has become prohibited to the artist. This process has largely been removed from the artist and is carried out by large industries” (p. 106). This book often shows its real strength when the author explores some of the ramifications of this aspect of political economy. In Chapter Two, for example, she travels through the historical process by which the industrial production of art materials, especially colour dyes, was taken from the hands of artists and others and placed firmly in the hands of industrial corporations. Drawing on Marx’s notion of ‘sensuous human activity,’ Singh suggests that humanity’s ‘intimate’ connection with the materiality of colour has become greatly less-

ened due to this historical transformation. “Ultimately, this is political and a major factor in the control and restriction of subjectivity at the level of the senses as it underpins dominant ideology” (p. 42). Earlier artists, such as Vermeer, El Greco, Rubens, Turner, and Uccello (to name a very few) had extensive training as part of their art education in the production of art material itself. Guild training required them to spend many years mastering the physicality of art, which in turn enabled each to ‘construct unique combinations of materials’ (p. 43).

In a different chapter she closely examines the work and times of the Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675), detailing, for example, how Vermeer would have ground the necessary materials, including the very expensive lapis lazuli, in order to produce the ultramarine pigment that has helped to give his work a signature style. Vermeer engaged in this expensive and time-consuming process, despite the relatively limited financial success he achieved in his own lifetime, because of what we can assume was a commitment to artistic communication over material gain. There are other examples of similarly dedicated artists given in the book, such as Jan Van Eyck. Her basic point is that these artists were not separated from the means of production and, as such, were in a much better position than most contemporary artists to produce truly unique colour arrangements and therefore to affect their audiences in original ways. In chapter two, however, Singh documents how since at least the late nineteenth century in northern Europe, the mass manufacturing of synthetic colours has increasingly replaced unique production processes and therefore come to limit both our built environments and our art. This, she believes, impoverishes us as human beings. She bases this portion of her argument firstly on Marx’s notion of ‘species-being’ and the benefit of retaining our ‘necessary’ connections to nature *and* secondly on the idea that we have as a species been equipped through evolution with a remarkable ‘visual syntax’ that acts parallel to the way Noam Chomsky suggests the ‘deep structure’ of language operates (pgs. 69-71). The latter suggestion implies that humans are imbued with a visual structure that encodes meaning through a multidimensional (rather than in a linear) fashion and that this form of encoding is something that is

tied directly to the nature of our being. Anything that impoverishes this visual structure impoverishes our very selves. Some artists, Singh suggests, have long known about our visual natures and have taken advantage of this knowledge. Paolo Uccello, for example, is said by her to have paired red-green binary colours within the painting *Niccolo Mauruzi da Tolentino at the Battle of San Romano* with almost mathematical precision in order to heighten and intensify specific colours through the effects binary pairings have on after-images (p. 78).

Specifics aside, the important thing here is that Singh is basically arguing that certain artists have made extensive use of their knowledge about the optical sciences of their time periods and coupled it with the ability to produce very specific colouration in their works to particular effect. They have therefore offered viewers, through their art productions, experiences that allowed them to gain/re-main in touch with their species-being and/or to see themselves through art as un-alienated humans using the full extent of their contemporary visual structures (as allocated to us through evolutionary processes).

This laudable relationship between art and affect, Singh tells us, became much less viable under capitalism and the industrially controlled production of synthetic colours for both art and everyday design. Contemporary dyes are produced extensively through coal-tar extraction. The few corporations that dominate this production process also, in a sense, dominate our human abilities to have ‘genuine’ experiences that directly link us to the natural world – alienation becomes an artifact of the industrial production of the very colours that artists and others use to try and express our contemporary human condition: “The low cost, limited facture, limited color, limited processing and competition between large monopolies in the instance of coal-tar dyes are the prime force that produce color with the same indifference for the consumerist senses and in the designed and built environment as the capitalist process has for the productive senses of the worker” (p. 63). In short, we are robbed of our ‘sensual cognitive capacities,’ seriously undercutting artists and others’ abilities to produce un-alienated affect through their works.

Not all contemporary artists remain stuck in this trap. Singh writes about Yves Klein, for example, who

“used the industrial process of production in his own art practice and therefore removed it from the immediate manufacturers’ necessity for profit. The environment [of his work production] could therefore be much nearer to this very type of [un-alienated] art labor” (p. 118). Klein, unlike most contemporary artists, began learning art from the ground up. For example, he started as a picture framer in London, and then worked with a chemist in experimenting with coal-tar processes to eventually produce the synthetic ultramarine pigment used to create a blue with a specific chroma that he eventually registered as *International Klein Blue* (p. 58). This specific shade of blue became the defining characteristic of his art works. Singh also tells us about the struggles of different art and design figures, such as the French architect Jean Prouve and his desire to use pre-fabrication techniques to provide high quality affordable housing in parts of Africa and elsewhere (pgs. 123-125). The industrial production of limited colour choices is, she notes, paralleled by other similar processes at work in our world that help limit the ability of artists and designers to reach toward a less alienated form of human relations.

This brings us to consider some of the limitations of Singh’s own work. Reading this book, I stopped numerous times to note ‘well, I don’t agree with that.’ Disagreeing with someone’s work is often extremely productive – it forcefully requires the reader to come to terms with his or her own not always overt position about a key issue. I will largely ignore the more commonplace disagreements I had with parts of Singh’s text (acknowledging that they largely stand as differences of perspective and training) and limit my focus here to what I think of as important factual or interpretive differences.

As I read this book I noticed that whenever Singh ventured away from art, design, and human biology and branched onto a more ‘social’ ground she often ventured toward much less firm territory. For example, when attempting to write about the effects of capitalism in comparison to non-capitalist human relations, she states: “In the days of larger communal cooperation workers functioned together as one whole communal entity to feed and shelter all the other members of the group. This was the responsibility of all for all” (Singh 2012:83). She goes on to refer to these otherwise unidentified times, places, and peoples as involving the

“relations of communal families of ancient times”(p. 84). It seems that Singh has relied far too extensively on the limited (and very dated) understanding of Friedrich Engels here and failed to inform herself adequately about people’s lives in actual non-capitalist social formations in real historical contexts. Factions, conflicts, warfare, hierarchies, slavery and near slavery, gender inequalities, and so on can all be found in a multitude of kin-based social formations. Specific non-capitalist formations have differed greatly in relation to who, exactly, received what kind of material supports within the overall social configuration. To lump all of these differing formations into one large entity and then not consider any actual non-capitalist forms of domination is highly problematic. And if the goal is to illuminate capitalist relations of production by contrasting them with non-capitalist relations, then we need to be sure to compare specific social formations and real people with specific situations of capitalism rather than comparing capitalism (problematic enough as a singularity) against a mythical period of egalitarian, conflict-free, unalienated human labour. The quotations I used above comes from a chapter entitled “Women, Culture, Class, Labor” that seems to me to be misplaced in this book, as it mentions issues directly related to art or design merely in passing. There are other examples in the same chapter that involve comparing real social relations to ideal or theoretical social relations, but the words above should be sufficient to suggest that the chapter will likely prove to be problematic for anthropologists, historians, and others of a similar background.

More germane to the heart of this book is an implication that Singh seems to be making in relation to the role that narrative plays in art. Part of Singh’s goal for her book is to wrestle art criticism away from the hands of those who insist on viewing art in terms of ‘transcendence,’ as if art were not a series of products created through human labour but rather something that lives only in the rarefied atmosphere of a desensitized bourgeois ideology. She wants to make it clear that “the occlusion of the sensual element and the role of technique in art history is instrumental in enabling a transcendent theory of art to persist” (p. 21). This perspective, she argues, is dominant in the writings of both non-Marxist *and* Marxist art critics. In this process, Singh seems to suggest that narrative

often serves as a kind of red herring for the critic to deconstruct, effectively enabling him or her to ignore the painting as a physical object and as a product of work production (p. 36). Narrative alone can therefore never be used to properly explain a work of art. As an example, she uses the work of Yves Klein to suggest that critics who attempt to read narrative into his work do so in order to try to destroy its real meaning:

The work of Yves Klein is, as a result, harnessed as an ideological referent for color in art as transcendently detached from its physical component. Klein is often represented as the painter of 'the void,' who attempted to represent color in its metaphysical or non-physical state. [p. 60]

For Singh, this completely misses the point, which is precisely the physical, sensual, visceral quality of Klein's use of colour. This point is further emphasized in the last chapter of the book, which focuses upon the work of J. M. W. Turner. Singh's enthusiasm for Turner's work seems to proceed apace with the increasing disappearance of a 'subject' or standard narrative and his complex use of diffused colours in his later work. She points out, quite rightly, that his art became less and less popular (both among the masses and among connoisseurs) not because of changes in his narratives per se, but because of the way he began to paint them. I think that Singh is making very important points here. I worry, however, that she may have associated narrative too closely with a negative and ideological form of art criticism or art history, almost suggesting that its primary purpose in art history is to obfuscate or otherwise interfere with the principal goal that art should be involved in – making it possible for artists and other creators to directly transform natural materials into sensual works that will impact the lives of those who view or otherwise partake of them.

I would argue, however, that some works depend exactly upon their narrative forms in order to express the critical social meaning that the author or painter intends for them to have. This seems to me to be as true of painting as it would be of, say, literature. Pablo Picasso's great anti-war work *Guernica*, for example, basically uses the limited colours of grey, black, and white to express a very complicated anti-war narrative. I would argue that it is primarily this narrative,

and not another form of physical expression (such as palette or spatial arrangements in themselves), that gives this work its main power as a political statement (though the other related materials may well add to this power). The narrative is at once both very simple and extremely complex. I doubt that anyone, regardless of background, could stand in front of this work of art and not understand it to be saying something about suffering and pain. Critics differ greatly in their interpretations of the more complex elements in *Guernica*, such as the meaning of the bull and horse, the light bulb that appears to approximate an eye, and so forth. I would suggest that it is precisely the complexity of the narrative and the strongly held and often conflicting opinions of critics and other commentators (including everyday tourists standing in front of the work) that fuels the anti-war messaging in the painting (and we might note that Picasso himself generally refused to shed more light on the narrative symbolism of the painting). Conflict of opinion mirrors the horrible conflict being played out in the painting (albeit in a lesser fashion) and practically forces us to confront our own unruly passions – making us reach for middle grounds if we are going to metaphorically avoid smashing each other to the ground over what is, after all, 'just a painting.' I have been witness to very strong disagreements over the 'meaning' of *Guernica*, as I have over other paintings or works of art. There is nothing mystical or transcendent in this kind of an interpretation, as it directly proceeds from the work itself and moves toward a socially embedded interpretation that depends upon an understanding of visceral human reactions. Yet it remains primarily based upon the notion of the importance of narrative in art.

One of my favorite painters is Edward Hopper. Interestingly enough, the poet Mark Strand makes an argument in his book *Hopper* against the power of narrative in Hopper's paintings about the earlier part of the 20th century in the United States, as well as the 'social messages' they might contain, and in favour of a more materialist interpretation *in order to* make a case for rather than against the transcendent power of his paintings. "It is my contention that Hopper's paintings transcend the appearance of actuality and locate the viewer in a virtual space where the influence and availability of feeling predominate" (Strand

2011:ix). He argues that *Nighthawks*, for example, gains its emotional power for the viewer not because of the four lonely looking people being depicted in the cafe or its moody use of colour, but due to the formal arrangements of its parts. Strand argues that it is the geometric shape of the large cafe window, in particular its formation of an isosceles trapezoid, that establishes the emotional pull of the painting as it leads us toward “a vanishing point that cannot be witnessed, but must be imagined” (Strand 2011:6). This is what gives the painting its sense of loss and what ultimately transforms it into the viewer’s sense of loss as well. Strand is suggesting here that it is the formal geometric arrangements in this and other Hopper paintings that give them their emotional edge and which create meaning for the viewer rather than the power of any narrative the works might be thought to contain. This would seem to agree with Singh, though it draws upon a different form of materialist argument and, ironically enough, leads back to the argument of transcendence that Singh most particularly opposes.

Having stood in front of the very powerful *Nighthawks* at the Art Institute of Chicago only a few years ago I can state that I do not agree with either Strand or Singh in relation to this particular work of art. As I remember my experience, it was precisely the moody lighting within the painting that suggested either a very late or a very early hour and, most particularly, the sympathetic depiction of the four figures in the work that hit me in the gut. I spent a lot of time at the painting, returning to it several times after having wandered away to look at other works, and making sure to view it from both near and far and from a number of different perspectives or angles. Strand’s notion that the geometric shape of the window ensures that the viewer always remains firmly outside of the frame looking in did not ring true for me. A male and female couple sit ‘across’ from and face the viewer, on the far side of the single bar/stool setup that dominates the interior. The woman may be saying something to the cafe worker, who seems to be turning toward her as he leans upward out of a crouch (though we can still see most of his face). Toward the far left of the painting (virtually out of the light that almost fully bathes the other three figures), a man sits on the very corner stool that faces the other three figures. He seems hunched forward, a hat

obscuring his head; only a very small part of the right cheek of his face is really visible to us. Is he staring at the couple? Perhaps feeling hostile toward them, or else reminded of his loneliness in their company? Or is this an alienated stare into the darkened night that shows up just outside of the opposite window (and behind the couple)? I think that it is very easy for the viewer to slip into this single figure (as I did) and view the narrative from his point of view – to ruminate about loneliness, or is it anger, or even a wistful longing? I would argue that, for most of us, narrative counts in a fundamental way in art. Facture and other pure forms of materiality is not enough for a fuller understanding of how human being actually experience art.

Since this book takes a materialist approach to understanding aesthetics, it seems fair to consider the book itself as a form of production from a materialist framework. All comments here refer to the paperback edition. There is no index provided in the volume (a lack that seems to have become common in too many contemporary books). This, I think, is a mistake, as it certainly diminishes its utility to a scholar who has already read the work and wants to re-read specific sections dealing with particular issues (e.g. sections on the notion of facture, for example, or attempts to trace the specific use of Marx in her arguments or the use of a particular source such as Walter Benjamin).

As a book that relies on the importance of colour, and utilizes a number of very specific arguments in relation to the colour of particular paintings, it is a shame that key examples of these paintings are rendered only as very poor black and white reproductions. (It is important to note that the author herself likely had very little control over this decision.) It is difficult to see how the reader could be expected to follow her intricate arguments about the subtle effects of colour in relation to these particular art works – it might almost be said that these very limited reproductions are something of a red herring, giving the illusion of an illustration that has little, if any, actual use-value (e.g. Vermeer is robbed of all of his rich use of colours, while later works of Turner come across as vague shadings rather than the subtle gradations of his originals). This is more than a little ironic, given the overall argument of the author and her critique of the mystification of standard art criticism.

Book-binding seems more than adequate to the task (falling open nicely in the hand) and the type is adequate, though it would have been significantly improved if it had been a shade darker. Overall then, as a material production, this book is fully adequate to its written task, but woefully inadequate to its visual responsibilities.

This is a book worth arguing with and an author who demands the attention of those who are interested in the possibilities of a materialist approach to understanding art as well as design or other built forms. Singh managed to provoke me about issues I did not even realize I had passionate feelings about and, in so doing, caused me to begin to refine and even re-define my own thoughts in relation to my love of art and *its* relationship to class and other social issues. It strikes me that this is exactly what she meant to do.

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Reference

Strand, Mark. 2011 *Hopper*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.