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## How to Approach the 'Materiality' of Art?

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## **How to Approach the ‘Materiality’ of Art?**

### **1. Taking the detour of an ‘approach towards’**

‘Ink’, ‘colour’, ‘bits and bytes’ – are these not at least parts of the obvious materials from which art – literature, poetry, painting, or new, digital formats – is made? Black ink on white paper, oil on canvas – zeros and ones, as used in the digital practices of sampling and AI painting. As the title of my essay suggests, I am not so sure they are. I am not even sure whether these kinds of materials and the theoretical concepts that support the impression of their materiality provide a helpful starting point for thinking about the ‘factual substance’ of artwork. The question of how to approach the materiality of art should therefore be understood as a gesture of caution: it willingly takes a detour, refrains from directly grasping the ‘thing’ – materiality itself. We stumble over the formulation of materiality as a thing (implied by the desire of ‘grasping’) – as if the materiality of material were a thing of things. Or, rather, the thing of things; the super-thing (with a Gödel’ian problem lurking in the background?). I doubt that questioning the materiality finally reaches a thing, a last thing, out of whose permutations and ensuing combinations artworks are constructed. Instead of trying to grasp [*begreifen*, in German] that ‘thing’, I would suggest the humbler gesture of carefully and slowly approaching the question of arts’ materiality. This gesture should constitute a gesture of touch, a gesture with a double, even paradoxical result: Firstly, as a touching gesture, coming fully to grips with this materiality, appropriating it, making it part of our thinking and rational mastery, is impossible. Touching always implies an unbridgeable distance. Secondly, despite this distance and our lack of mastery, we come in touch with this materiality. We are touched by it – a familiar feeling in art, perhaps its ultimate secret, touching us, at a distance (cf. Ungelenk) – and, conversely, we are also (always) in contact with arts’ materiality. This does not guarantee our understanding of it. On the contrary, it implies that we (spectators, audience, readers and ‘thinkers of art’) are entangled in its materiality. Do we here encounter one reason why we cannot easily grasp or objectively apprehend this materiality – why it is nothing that can be understood? It may not be a thing, not an object that we face, but something for which and in which we might be accomplices, at least something that is so fragile that it cannot but be open for our cooperation. Perhaps it is something which gains stability (throughout the ages, centuries) by being so open to different kinds of productive re-touches. If substance has to do with duration, with perseverance against time, then this openness and flexibility of arts’ (virtual) entanglements might, against our intuitions, indeed touch the question of materiality.

However, a complication arises from this kind of approach as touch: ontology is contaminated with the question of pragmatics, with the issue of what phenomenology calls ‘intention’, i.e., with questions of (human) relations, not only towards but as part of ‘what is’. This complication was famously introduced by Martin Heidegger and further developed – as questions of touch – by Jean-Luc Nancy. In other words, ‘materiality’ will have to be thought about in terms of *Mitsein*, of ‘being-with’. The trajectory of my essay will lead toward this ‘being

with' that I think is constitutive for the materiality of art. In order to open up this perspective, the agents involved in arts' being-with have to be freed from their traditional conceptual framing and find new ways of arrangements that account for their stability, for their (temporal but endurable) formation of form, or rather: for their materiality.

## 2. The hierarchy of inscription

Intuitions of materiality rely heavily on the binary of form and matter. The relation between the two is not as simple as it might seem, especially if one takes the Aristotelean pedigree of the binary seriously. Nevertheless, it brings along well-known characteristics that have structured the understanding of the world far beyond the narrow boundaries of specialist questions of ontology. Matter is the basis of all that is, and more than this, in it lies the potential of all that can be. However, matter is nothing in itself. It is in need of 'a supplement', the supplement of form. Form actualises matter's potential and thereby brings into being what is so familiar to us: all the intelligibility, the perceptibility, the things, their uses – their order, too, is an effect of form. The actual is open to our senses and our understanding, while matter's potentiality, its latency (should we call it, in a non-Aristotelian fashion, its virtuality?) is not.<sup>1</sup>

It may be an effect of our sensual and cognitive bias towards the actual that the binary of matter and form suffers an imbalance: form –despite its discrete 'weakness' compared to matter's potentiality– is conceived of as the 'active' and therefore decisive principle which governs over matter's merely 'passive' materiality. The binary of active and passive comes to interfere with the binary of matter and form to such an extent that it almost completely eclipses the productivity of matter, 'generously' attributing 'engendering' to the 'activity' of form. In other words, the binary of matter and form receives its bias by being associated with genders – which were, in ancient times, also mainly constructed along the axis of active and passive (cf. Laqueur). Matter, associated with the 'motherly' by the (pseudo?)-etymology of Latin *materia*, comes to signify the passive (female) 'ground', form the active (male) principle that produces discrete unities from the blurry chaos of material potentiality. Luce Irigaray's *Speculum de l'autre femme* is dedicated to the philosophical consequences of this gendered production of unity which operates on the basis of a philosophically invisible (because it is non-unitary) other: Irigaray associates this other with a mirror, or a speculum. It is an indiscrete, apparently passive other, which serves to constitute the One by mirroring it to itself. However, the speculum's specific non-unitary logic of productivity is eclipsed by the 'logic of the One' produced in the process of othering, making the mirror the passive, indiscernible background for the one. It is the One with which one can calculate.

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction between the actual and the virtual is borrowed from Gilles Deleuze (cf. *Différence et répétition*), as are many other concepts used in this paper.

### 3. The white canvas, or: 'The artwork is made of relationships'<sup>2</sup>

Our intuitive reconstruction of the scene of writing or painting says a lot about the mechanism described by Irigaray and its bias toward form's logic of the one. All starts, we are used to assuming, with the problem of the white paper or canvas. Why? How is it that we associate the beginning with emptiness, not with the overwhelming fullness of colours and brushes that are at the artist's disposal? With a myriad of words, of stories, of themes and motives (cf. Deleuze 86)? How come we (viewers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century) are used to thinking of art in terms of 'creation' while being afraid of the white paper's empty openness, the very condition of possibility for the genius's hybris-laden *creatio ex nihilo*?

The white, empty page or canvas is one symptom of the simplification that the binary of matter and form suffers when associated with the artistic process: it is turned into the typical scene of inscription. Matter is degraded to the notion of a 'neutral ground', into which form is scratched or inscribed, and, at the same time, to the notion of the material, neutral in itself, with which this inscription is performed. White paper or canvas – and dark ink or oil colours. In contrast to Aristotle's binary of form and matter and form's actualising of matter's virtual potentialities, the scene of inscription does not know a transition from neutrality (background, colour) to painted form or written meaning. A void opens up in the wake of the writing/painting scene's simplification. Form is inscribed into passive, neutral matter – why that? And by what/whom?

We all know the answer. The modern artist-subject is born from this systemic void and from now on readily 'accepts' all the responsibilities of the artistic process. This subject finds himself (for, traditionally and structurally, the artist is male) in an all-too authoritative place: he is provided with a stable, neutral, non-significative material-ground (white paper, canvas) and neutral, non-significative material-tools (colour, ink) which are (or rather seem to be) at his free disposal. Form or meaning are to be created by him. It is not surprising that the artist-subject is hardly able to carry the heavy load of form and meaning on his frail shoulders – the label of the 'genius' may well give only a name to the discrepancy between these shoulders and the artistic world's load, one which they are supposed to carry (a discrepancy of dimensions!). Purely 'subjective', conative characteristics, like "expression" or "style", do not suffice to guarantee the stability required of artistic form and meaning. Two related mechanisms come to the subject-artist's help, both doing their work quite silently and invisibly, and both expanding the subject-artist's 'agency' well beyond the realm of intention or expression, expanding it on a structural, abstract level: central perspective and the concept of representation.

To begin with the latter: Representation introduces a divide into the world, a divide which uncannily resembles the simplified version of the matter/form binary. The 'material', 'physical' world is separated from an 'other' sphere, empty at the beginning, where a 'spiritual' mirror-image of the 'material' world is fabricated. In modern philosophy this 'other sphere' has a name: it is called consciousness and attributed to 'the subject', with whose apparatus of perception and faculties of memory and cognition it is inseparably connected.

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<sup>2</sup> The thesis argued in this section is indebted to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's philosophy, in which the notion of 'composition', i.e. relationships or differences of difference, plays a crucial, constitutive role (cf. *Mille Plateaux*).

Although representation's divide separates 'matters' (for Descartes, *res extensa* from *res cogitans*), it also creates channels of transition: the image can, somehow, be 'judged' by its original – Thomas Aquinas famously defined truth as "adaequatio rei et intellectus" (Thomas I 1). Hegel's dialectical philosophy is concerned with this divide and its movements of transition – with the result of the divide itself falling victim to the processes of positive negations and its sublating contradictions. However, it is not 'the full original' (the intuitive 'material' world) but the 'sphere' of spirit (the 'intellectual world') which survives in the end. Having started as an empty sphere (not even consciousness) at the beginning of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the world-spirit, pure concept or 'form', stands at the end of the dialectical process, without any 'passive', neutral or a-significative matter remaining. Hegel's philosophy testifies to the alliance that representation can form with the notion of the subject, or to put it better, how modern subjectivity can find support in the mechanism of representation (which is the older concept of the two). Despite being autonomous, the (Hegelian) subject is built from and stabilised through resemblances (of outside and inside, needing the divide) – *Gottesebenbildlichkeit*, 'being in the image of God', serving as the subject's major support in processes of representation.

Resemblance and representationality have long played a crucial role in (polemically) defining and stabilising understandings of art. Plato's famous depreciation of art as merely another shadow of shadows works along the representational axis of 'original' and 'copy/representation'. Stendhal's metaphor of realist writing as carrying a mirror through the streets expresses an affirmative idea of art – and uses the same divided spheres of representation's mechanism. Here, I am not pursuing an argument against a representational (mis)understanding of art, as Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Jean-Luc Nancy and many others have done with enormous proficiency and conceptual rigour. It is rather the consequences of conceptualising the materiality of art that concern me. No matter whether art is understood as a separate sphere, producing some kind of special representation of 'the real, normal world', or whether art seeks to produce the first, primal image, the Platonic idea behind and 'deeper' than all worldly phenomena (cf. Nancy 11) – the mechanism of representationality stabilises notions of form and tends to suppress or even erase notions of materiality.

A second, powerful mechanism that expands the subject's agency and its capacity to carry a whole (artistic) world on its shoulders can be found in central perspective. Unlike the mechanism of representation, central perspective does not find support in a world (of images) shared with the recipients, it is not common 'content' that makes transitions possible and stabilises the artwork. It is instead the construction of an abstract, common space. This space is not, as one might think, held together by the central focus of the vanishing point. The vanishing point that we can often so easily reconstruct by lengthening the lines of architectural 'minor matters' is only the imaginary double of what is called the eyepoint of central perspective's construction: a point situated in front of the canvas, an abstract, invisible but structurally decisive position. It is here that the artwork's production and its reception meet, as this position does not only designate the viewpoint from which it is constructed, but also the position of its 'correct', distortion-free reception. In other words: Central perspective makes artist and audience accomplices that share the load of 'birthing a world'. Moreover, the canvas has never been empty at the beginning of the process of painting.

It has always been striated (cf. Deleuze and Guattari *Mille Plateaux 2*) with complicated (perhaps invisible) nets of lines. In order to structure the painting, these lines do not actually have to be 'inscribed' on the canvas. 'Inscription' cannot take place without reference to these lines – either quietly, as submission under the 'laws of perspective', or as the open breach with them, the latter strengthening these laws rather than escaping them. With regard to the binary of form and matter, do we have to classify central perspective as a factor of form? Or should it be a factor of matter? Its apparent a-significance rather points to the latter, its impact on shape (*Gestalt*) to the former.

Before we move on, two things should be noted, because we will come back to them: for the question of arts' materiality, the approximation or even concurrence of production and reception is important. It highlights the fact that we might have less to do with classical ontology, with (the state of) things, but be concerned with *processes*, with endless (inter)actions. Second, and this is close enough to the first that it appears to be a reformulation, pragmatic relations (not only artist –artwork– recipient) are introduced as constitutive. The question of 'the artwork', of its materiality, stability and durability cannot be separated from the question of pragmatic relations – it is a question of relationships (and not of a special type of things).

In order to get a more concrete, more 'substantial' impression of what is at stake in artistic scenes of inscription, I would suggest looking at some painted representations of them. As this formulation indicates (reintroducing the notion of 'representation' that we claimed for the scene of inscription itself), the artistic 'knowledge' that we are searching for is likely to work through reduplication or even multiplication. I hesitate to use the concept of reflection, because reflection implies a final integration in a higher unit – a term which I am not so sure is adequate here.

Let us start with a classic, about which everything (and more) has already been said and written: Velázquez' *Las Meninas*.



Figure 1: Diego Velázquez: *Las Meninas*. 1656, oil on canvas, 312x281 cm, Madrid: Museo del Prado.

The painting shows –among many other things (cf. Greub)– a scene of painting. It is not primarily the figure of the painter towards which the painting guides the viewers' eyes, but the artist's canvas, the outer edge of which cuts a highlighted line through the picture's dark space. In other words, the artistic 'material' is prominently present in the painting (not only the canvas, but also the paint and the brushes, as we will soon see). However, what remains absent is the ominous 'white canvas' mentioned previously: It is the (darkish) rear of the canvas, its wooden framework, that the viewers get to see – the front, the artist's painting-in-the-making (is it still white and more or less untouched?) is hidden from our view. This hidden front, the mystery of what is being made, constitutes this singular painting's enigma. That is why I think *Las Meninas* illustrates the question that we encountered when thinking about the scene of inscription and its constitution of the artwork as a form engendered by an artist-subject. As Michel Foucault and many others have shown, the beauty of Velázquez' painting lies in the



fact that it does not merely present us with an enigma, but also with different possible and conflicting answers to it.

One strand of answers has its origin in a self-referential *mis-en-abyme*: As viewers, we are confronted with (at least) two paintings: the one that we see, and one (actually more than one, but here *the* enigmatic one) inside the painted world. As we can identify the painter depicted in the painting as Diego Velázquez, short-circuiting the two paintings appears not to be far-fetched. The unusually large format of the painting (*Las Meninas* was one of the largest paintings he made) supports this thesis. However, the thesis is bought at a price: the artist-subject is split in two. The painted artist and the artist-painter do not share one perspective; on the contrary, the painting could not represent itself in a 'natural' perspective. Consequently, the painting is ripped along the highlighted edge of the represented canvas, and the painted Velázquez assumes a spectral, ghostly presence in a painting made by his own hand. Nevertheless, presences of this kind are not unknown to the painting. One of the three 'solutions' it presents us with – they are aligned neatly, one next to the other, in the optical centre of the painting – is explicitly mirror-produced, the other two (the painter, and the observer on the stairs) may too turn out to be spectral or 'virtual' realities.

The second strand is established by a play of mirrors. The hidden front of the canvas is probably revealed, though indirectly, by a mirror at the back wall. The mirror shows the portrait of the royal couple and therefore provides us with the one element of situational context that, indeed, resolves the story depicted by the painting. The painter has come inside the palace in order to paint the royal couple – a special event that draws not only the *infanta's* attention but also attracts the eponymous maids-of-honour and a dog. However, the mirror-image is too perfect; it suspiciously resembles the portrait itself. Look at the red curtain at the right top corner, the half-figure symmetry: the mirror image *is* the portrait. As the group of people surrounding the *infanta* is placed somewhere in between the mirror and its 'original', the 'mirror-image' at the back wall cannot be a physical representation of something that is present in the room depicted by the painting. This second 'solution' to the painting's enigma of the hidden canvas turns out to work in the same way the first 'solution' did: by the (intellectual) identification of two images, stabilised by some contextual story rather than by the internal 'logic' of the painting itself. On the contrary, the painting itself outrightly contradicts this solution: the format of the painting-in-the-making is too large for a portrait. Nevertheless, this 'solution' is equally important as the first one. The classic constellation that this solution breaks open, that it exposes and dispenses with, is one of representation. The scene of painting consists of the (male!) artist and his (female) model, the scene of inscription is stabilised by the resemblance or at least reference between artwork and 'model'/'world'. A short glance at Rembrandt's *The Artist Drawing from the Model* may provide us with some cues for our argument:



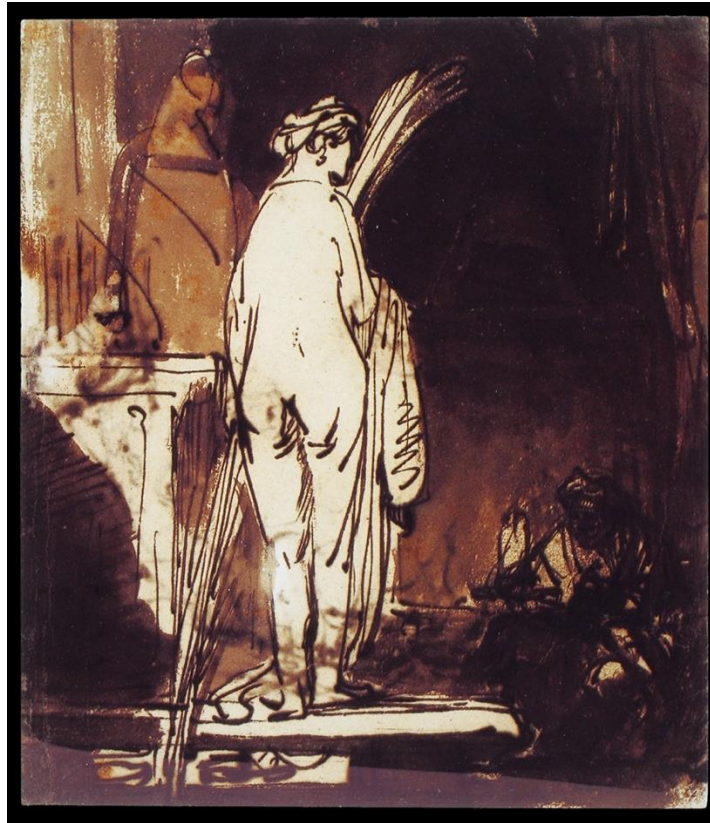


Figure 2: Rembrandt: *Artist Drawing from the Model*, ca. 1639, ink on paper, 18,8x16,4 cm, London: British Museum

Similar to Velázquez' self-portrait, the artist relegates himself to the dark background. However, as Rembrandt does not reduplicate the motives – *infanta*/maids of honour *and* the absent royal couple– the difference in aspect is highlighted: Whereas the artist-in-the-picture sees and draws the front of the model, the viewers get to see the model from behind. In other words: The picture does not withstand the integration of the mechanism of representation. Instead of showing a scene of representation, the scene builds up a tension which finally subsides. As with Velázquez, it is a painting which oscillates between two images –the 'model-image' and the 'artist-image', the one spectral to the other– it remains unclear whether the model is haunted by the artist-ghost or the artist by the model-ghost. In terms of materiality, the model-ghost appears to be 'made' from the absence of the dark artist-ink-materiality. Rene Magritte's *Not to Be Reproduced* may be read as an explicit comment on this artistic problem:



Figure 3: Rene Magritte: *Not to Be Reproduced*. Oil on canvas, 81x65cm, Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans van Beuningen.

*Las Meninas* is not as extreme a case as it is Rembrandt's drawing. It only hints at the tension of different perspectives integrated in one painting but prevents an escalation by not depicting the artist's model. The mirror on the wall appears to solve the riddle of the hidden canvas, but in fact poses another question: Whose position is it that we, as viewers, have taken over? Almost all eyes seem to be on us – but the position does not feel regal. We do not see ourselves in the mirror, which is not prevented by the fact that the mirror shows a couple that it is hard to identify with, as every viewer is a single viewer. As we will see in a minute, the mirror is wide of the eyepoint constructed by the painting's central perspective.

Looking in the mirror, the ideal spectator will probably not catch a glimpse of themselves, but of the hidden canvas! Have we been deceived into thinking that we were able to glance at the portrait's 'model', its reference in the world? Have we, all the while, merely seen the mirrored copy of the painted portrait itself? Is there even 'a model' (beyond the discursive context, which tells stories about dynasties and artists), or are there just portraits and portraits of portraits? The second answer to the painting's enigma unsettles the mechanics of representation.

A central question remains with regard to the mirror optics of the painting: Towards where are all the figures in the painting looking, if not at the royal couple standing model for the famous artist? There might be a simple answer to this question: they are all looking into a mirror. This explains the complex play of sight axes between the characters. The artist and the maid to the right are actually looking at the *infanta* –through the mirror that is placed at the image plane. The *infanta* is constructed as the protagonist of the painting by catching all the eyes: those of the artist, the maids of honour, the viewer– and also her own! The riddle of the hidden canvas thus appears to have been solved: the paintings *can*, in a spectral way, as we will see, be identified as we tried at first. However, this is only quite true. It is not the artist's view in the mirror that the painting depicts. From his standpoint, he would not be able to see the back of the canvas. The painting's central perspective allows us to neatly reconstruct the vanishing point and thereby gain an idea of the location of its virtual eyepoint: it comes to coincide with the male observer on the stairs at the back of the painting. He embodies the third strand of solutions, being placed furthest right on the axis of solutions: (1) artist, (2) royal mirror model/portrait, (3) observer on the stairs. It is no coincidence that this solution-series contains the main components of an artwork's communicative system, as it is not by chance that the observer depicted, whose elbow appears to demarcate the picture's vanishing point, is composed as the viewer's virtual double, with the eyepoint (the point of ideal reception) placed directly opposite the observer on the stairs, on the other side of the image plane's mirror. In contrast to the artist, who may well have a free view of the mirror, the observer-on-the-stairs faces a similar, or rather mirrored, problem to Rembrandt: his 'real' (worldly) perspective on the scene (the group viewed from behind) is not compatible with the (artistic) mirror-perspective (frontside). Worse still, both interfere with his 'natural' perspective. As with Rembrandt, the painted perspective that the viewers get is a spectral extrapolation, adding either a ghost-observer to a living scene or a ghost-scene to a living observer. The symmetry of artist and observer, and the strong chance of confusing the given perspective with the artist's view in the mirror strengthens the latter (as the scene is mirrored), while the portrait-like depiction of the observer on the stairs speaks for the former, with a piece of black curtain in the top left corner and the light, almost monochrome background that is its resemblance to the mirror portrait.

The observer-on-the-stairs does not provide us with the perfect solution to the painting's riddle: the responsibility for the artwork's being and stability has not shifted from artist or model/painting (resemblance) to the viewer. However, the observer-on-the-stairs holds a special position, actively occupying a threshold. The staircase appears to lead out of the painting – into the light, back to the white canvas. His movement upwards is a gesture of opening: he seems to

draw or hold open the curtain with his right hand, opening the view on the painting, giving light to the scene (which is, strangely, nearly artificially lighted); it is therefore no coincidence that the vanishing point, opening the space of the painting is placed on his right elbow. However, the gesture of opening is paradoxical. The ultimate background against which the dark observer appears is identical in colour to the painting's optical centre, the *infanta's* dress. The marginal observer disrupts the authorities –the royal couple, the artist– on which the contextual, historical stabilisation of the painting relies. Instead of resolving the riddle, the observer presents us with a new one.

Velázquez' masterpiece integrates what could be called *the backstage of painting*. Let us, for a moment, assume that this backstage leads us towards its 'materiality'. Artist, mirror and observer are somehow behind the depicted motif. They share an impossible perspective, only viewing the scene from behind (as we, the viewers, get to see only the rear of the canvas). What is absent from Velázquez' painting is the painting-in-the-making and the real-life 'model'. The painting therefore questions the classical stabilising mechanism of the visual arts: the representation of 'world'. Velázquez presents us with an image of painting – it is, however, only images that we encounter, images that do not refer to their –or *any*– 'original': the image-artist, the image-of-the-model-portrait (which is an image of an image), the image-observer. Although Velázquez' masterpiece appears to integrate all these images into one, it in fact fragments the assumed natural connection of what could be called the constitutive constellation of a painting. The painting we see is not reducible to an effect of its backstage. It is not (merely) the representation of a historical situation, as the mirror in the background invites us to think – its material is not merely *historical or mythical stories/situations*; it is not the product of an artist's ingenious creation – its material is not merely the *oil colours* on his palette; nor is it held together by a third-party observer, who may piece its fragments of sense together, acting as an intermediary between image and world, embodying the *one*, the central perspective of the image's world – its material is not *sense*, following the principle of the excluded third.

Velázquez' masterpiece exposes a painting as a composition in the fullest sense. It is composed not by an artist, but as an interplay between all the material forces that Velázquez represents in *Las Meninas* as a painting's backstage area. It is important to note that these forces include 'pragmatic' impacts, as artist-forces, forces of mirror-representation and recipient-forces, which Velázquez explicitly de-hierarchises by arranging them as a horizontal series on a line, all 'inside' the composition. The composition does not know a responsible outside (such as *the artist's intention, the historical situation*): the only relations that it upholds with an outside are openings. We have identified the most obvious one at the end of the staircase. There may be several more: the dark paintings (each potentially constructing a line of flight to some other, identifiable masterpiece), the dog (not looking anywhere), the light opening at the right front, which contrasts with the closed structure of the canvas' rear on the left (and matches the *infanta's* dress in colour, exactly as the opening in the background).

The composition holds together as a composition (not as a 'representation'): as a highly complex assemblage of relations. It generates itself as the whole, which is not in need of a 'great' whole outside (neither 'the model/original' nor 'the artist'). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have developed an

understanding of the artwork that focuses on the self-stabilisation and the ‘autonomy’ of a composition: “The artist creates blocs of percepts and affects, but the only law of creation is that the compound must stand up on its own. The artist’s greatest difficulty is to make it *stand up on its own*” (*What is Philosophy?* 164). Our analysis of Velázquez’ *Las Meninas* extends and somewhat opens up Deleuze’s and Guattari’s conceptualisation: the “compound” or composition that *is* the artwork does not constitute a thing that goes between artist and recipient, an autonomous thing, but involves them – which is particularly important for the recipients, as their involvement is responsible for the artwork’s afterlife. We will return to this theme later.

The relations of optics and perspective may be the least complicated net of relationships the painting gives us. Its interplay with the character’s axes of sight and some aspects of colour (the dress and the opening, for example) is, however, strong enough to construct a first bundle of relations that begins to constitute the painting’s composition. The stability generated by this composition is not a result of integration. On the contrary, it is the fact of the perspectives not being compatible with the idea of *one* perspective that generates cohesive force. It is not sameness but difference that constitutes the denseness and stability of the painting in its singularity.

The observations made with the help of Velázquez’ *Las Meninas* can be condensed into two tentative theses:

- (1) The artwork holds (itself) together as a composition. It does not know of, and it does not need, an outside.
- (2) The artwork is made of relationships (neither of arranged, ‘represented’ or ‘created’ things, nor of neutral, passive material).

I would suggest taking one further, somewhat daring step and attempting a third thesis:

#### 4. ‘The artwork is made out of itself’<sup>3</sup>

This thesis again takes Diego Velázquez’ *Las Meninas* as its point of departure. Does the painter not present us with the ‘material’ of painting? At least our intuition of a painting’s materiality finds representation in the masterpiece. We do not only see the canvas (or its rear), that is, a painting’s material support, but we also see the actual ‘material’ out of which the painting is created: The painter-in-the-picture shows us his palette, with neatly arranged blobs of colour on it.

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<sup>3</sup> The thesis argued in this section is indebted to Niklas Luhmann’s system theory, for which the notion of ‘autopoiesis’ is central. In *Art as a Social System* Luhmann develops an understanding of the artwork as an autopoietic construct. I suggest suspending the notion of form (which always buys into the old binary of matter and form) and turning to Deleuze’s concept of composition, rather than that of Luhmann, who uses a specific concept of form borrowed from George Spencer Brown.





Figure 4: Detail from: Velázquez, *Las Meninas*.

Has the painter hardly started working? Only a few touches appear to have been made – using all the colours without mixing them. But how should that impression be brought together with the identifications of his and ‘our’ painting or the mirror-painting that we were tending towards above? An identification that, resulting from the mirror-imagery, presupposes a ‘finished’ piece of art? In any case, the palette provides the viewers with an ‘analytical’ insight that matches their intuition with regard to the materiality of the painting: ‘It is out of these colours that the painting you are seeing has been made’ is the palette’s message. This message does not only sit uneasily with the painting’s composition, which implies that the canvas we do not see is *not* (half) empty, but somehow related to (mirrored by?) the other ‘paintings’ in the picture, the portraits of the royal couple and the observer on the stairs. It is also simply not true – a placative lie. The artwork in front of us is *not* materially made of *these* colours. They are singular blobs of colour that sit on top of several layers of paint, at a very specific location in the painting (the palette) that generates their meaning as specific, as other, ‘more fundamental’ blobs of colour. However, *materially*, these blobs do not come before but after other, less pure touches of paint. The gesture of the simple, distinguishable, *single* colours on the palette is a painted synecdoche: few touches come to stand for the material foundation of the painting as a whole. I think that Velázquez’ painting questions this visual rhetorical ruse: it questions it as all-too abstract, illogical and a much-too-simple solution when compared to the complex riddles that his painting directs at its viewers.

Two hundred and fifty years after Velázquez, Max Liebermann dedicated a whole painting to the artistic question of the palette that plays only a minor role in the Spanish master’s painting. *Self-Portrait with Palette at the Easel, in Profile Towards Right* was painted in 1915.



Figure 5: Max Liebermann: *Self-Portrait with Palette at the Easel, in Profile Towards Right*, 1915, oil on cardboard, 80x65 cm, in private possession.

The depiction of the painter in profile seems to suspend the play of perspective and sight axes which are so prominent in Velázquez's painting, seeming to take the viewers and their involvement out of the game. Instead, the prominent palette directs attention to colour – or rather, to relationships of colour, as we will see.

Liebermann's painting is a classic self-portrait. It depicts the painter against a light background, the painter-figure being developed by an interplay of only a handful of characteristic colour hues: a warm brown, a cold blue and white, and a brown which is dark, almost black. A closer look at the light background leads us to a first decisive observation: the light background is itself composed of the same hues. The weight of the colours may have changed, the blue and white –used for the collar, the sleeve and highlights of the portrait–



have become dominant in the background. It is, however, neatly balanced with warm brown hues – as it is in the figure of the artist. The light background is hardly distinguishable from the canvas depicted to the right of the painting. The vertical lines separating canvas and background pose a challenge to the viewers – and they are, at the same time, an important constituent for the painting's perspectival (and pictorial!) composition. It is the lateral surface of the canvas, with its dark nails fastening the canvas to the wooden frame underneath, that demarcates most clearly the canvas of which the viewers get to see only a small amount. The artist looks at the canvas almost as if he is studying his face in a mirror – and, like Velázquez' portrait of the royal couple in *Las Meninas*, Liebermann makes the canvas gleam, mirror-like, reflecting the light that appears to come from behind the painter. This has a double effect. Firstly, the canvas gains a certain distinguishability, gains 'form'. As can be observed most clearly in the right-hand corner, this form is generated by a difference in intensity: the most intense lateral side of the canvas (comparable in intensity with the artist in the picture), while in the least intense canvas, the background of the painting (the wall behind the artist) is of an intensity somewhere in-between the two. It is important to note that this difference of intensity fades towards the bottom of the canvas – it is not a stable difference, but an effect of processes of shifting intensities. Secondly, the painting's composition of light makes the vague figure painted on the canvas oscillate between a mirror-image and the artist's shadow. I would argue that it is both: The transformation of colour intensity and colour hue is indebted to the optics of shadowing, as the figure's greyish blue emphasises – the same greyish blue that also surrounds the figure of the artist, shadow-like, against the wall. At the same time, the mirror-theme comments on the genre of the self-portrait, exposing the paradoxes of perspective discussed above. Viewed together, Liebermann's painting transposes the question of the self-portrait (that is always also a reflection on the process of painting) into a question of colour, or rather into a question of relationships and intensities of colours. The scene of inscription is suspended: background and figure do not relate to each other as neutral ground to formed, meaningful *Gestalt*. The one is rather determined by, or even made out of, the other. The 'whiteness' of the canvas turns out to be the sum or spectrum of the colours out of which the effect of 'resemblance' and figuration is generated. It is impossible to say whether this spectrum of hues comes from the background or from the figure of the artist – there can, however, be no doubt about the interplay of intensities between the two.

Similarly to Velázquez' *Las Meninas*, Liebermann's painting composes itself as a complex, in parts paradoxical, assemblage of paintings. It is (at least) three paintings that the viewer encounters when studying *Self-Portrait with Palette at the Easel, in Profile Towards Right*. We have already addressed two of them: (1) the painting as a whole, dominated by the depiction of the artist; (2) the painting on the canvas, which appears to be itself a portrait, and can thereby easily be identified with the painting that the viewers are seeing (whether this is correct or not is an entirely separate question). The artist depicted contemplates his painting as we, the viewers, contemplate Liebermann's painting. The two sight axes which link the internal and the external communicative system are perpendicular. This might at first introduce a certain distance. However, the thin vertical line separating the depicted canvas from the background acts as a hinge connecting the pragmatic layers that correspond to the sight axes. The can-

vas/background depicted and the actual canvas/background communicate – they are hardly distinguishable. The intensity of the blurred figure in the portrait matches, in its upper half, the intensity of the painting's overall background. As an effect, this figure somehow emanates from the painting's shimmering background: it forms itself as a negentropic spectral apparition engendered by a re-ordering/re-intensification of the background's characteristically select spectrum of colours. At the same time, the genre-typical mirror relation renders this blurry emanation a comment on art's processes of figuration: an open process of figuration and de-figuration is staged between the artist-image and his artwork. The figure fades into mere intensities of hues –this would be from left to right, from artist depicted to the artwork depicted– and, the other way round, a mere difference of colour (which is to say, intensity) creates a figure-effect (read from right to left) – the 'mirror-portrait' makes the 'principal' self-portrait readable as an effect of colour intensity (that is to say, of productive 'difference'). Both methods suspend a classical understanding of resemblance and affirm the dynamic process of (de)figuration, a process that always hovers in-between mere difference of intensities and identifiable *Gestalt*. It is this process, commented upon by the synecdochical relationship of principal portrait and portrait-within-the-portrait, that also takes place between the portrait and its background. In terms of colour, the portrait is indeed made of itself, the figure of the artist is set against the background of colours, out of whose differences of intensities it is itself created. (3) The third painting that we encounter when viewing Liebermann's *Self-Portrait with Palette at the Easel, in Profile Towards Right* shifts these observations towards the question of materiality. The artwork that I am talking of is not painted on canvas but on wood: on the 'palette' mentioned in the title.

Unlike the palette in Velázquez' painting, Liebermann's palette does not analytically assemble the colours used for the artwork in which it features: there are no discrete blobs, but what look like chaotically blurred touches of paint. However, viewed more closely, the chaos begins to gain form: in their interplay between one another and the wooden tone of the palette, the touches fabricate a seascape. We can discern a fishing cutter stranded by the tide in the top-left corner and a figure clad in blue –or is it a group of figures?– walking on the wet beach in the bottom left. The vague impression of a seascape may be dismissed as a mere subjective projection, a trick my brain has played me in the search for meaning when challenged by chaos. However, seascapes chime with Liebermann. The one on the palette shows the same characteristics that we observed in the other painting-within-the-painting: it somehow transgresses its material boundaries. Take a look at the top-left corner: the portrait's light, blueish-grey background takes the role of the horizon, the sky or water that we can discern between the cutter's masts and superstructure. As a result, the thin brown line that demarcates the wooden palette assumes the aspect of a far-off shoreline, with the background (is it the wall in the studio?) forming the sky, with reflections of the shoreline in the wet sand. The painting-in-the-painting reaches beyond its limits, involving its surrounding (including us, the viewers!) in its own composition.

Instead of neutral material as the basis for the creative process, the palette presents us with a proliferating, contagious composition of relationships, with an artwork in itself that is somehow not to be separated from the artwork in which it appears to be integrated. The palette poses important questions of a

painting's materiality: Is the artist figure a complication, a creative re-configuration of a seascape, of the artist's art? Its colours lend support to this thesis: the warm and greenish-dirty tones of the face correspond to the sand of the beach, the whitish-blue of highlights, flesh tint, collar and sleeves to the spray and the reflection of the sky on the wet beach. In other words: is the self-portrait made out of a seascape, as the logic of the palette suggests? Or is it the other way round: is the painting on the palette not made *by* the artist-figure, as we are used to thinking, but *from* it?

Certainly, it is not simple, abstract, neutral colours applied to a canvas with brushes directed by the master, lending materiality to a genius' 'spiritual' idea. Instead of material, tools and spiritual form, we find interaction, relationships of intensity that create not ex nihilo, but out of each other, in an act of togetherness that does not know single beginnings. The palette's wood is not the material basis on which layers of colour –the actual painting– are brushed. It contributes (or does it borrow?) one decisive colour intensity to the assemblage that *is* the artwork. The brushes are not merely tools that were used for a certain intentional purpose. In Liebermann's self-portrait, the brush is about to paint – a brush.

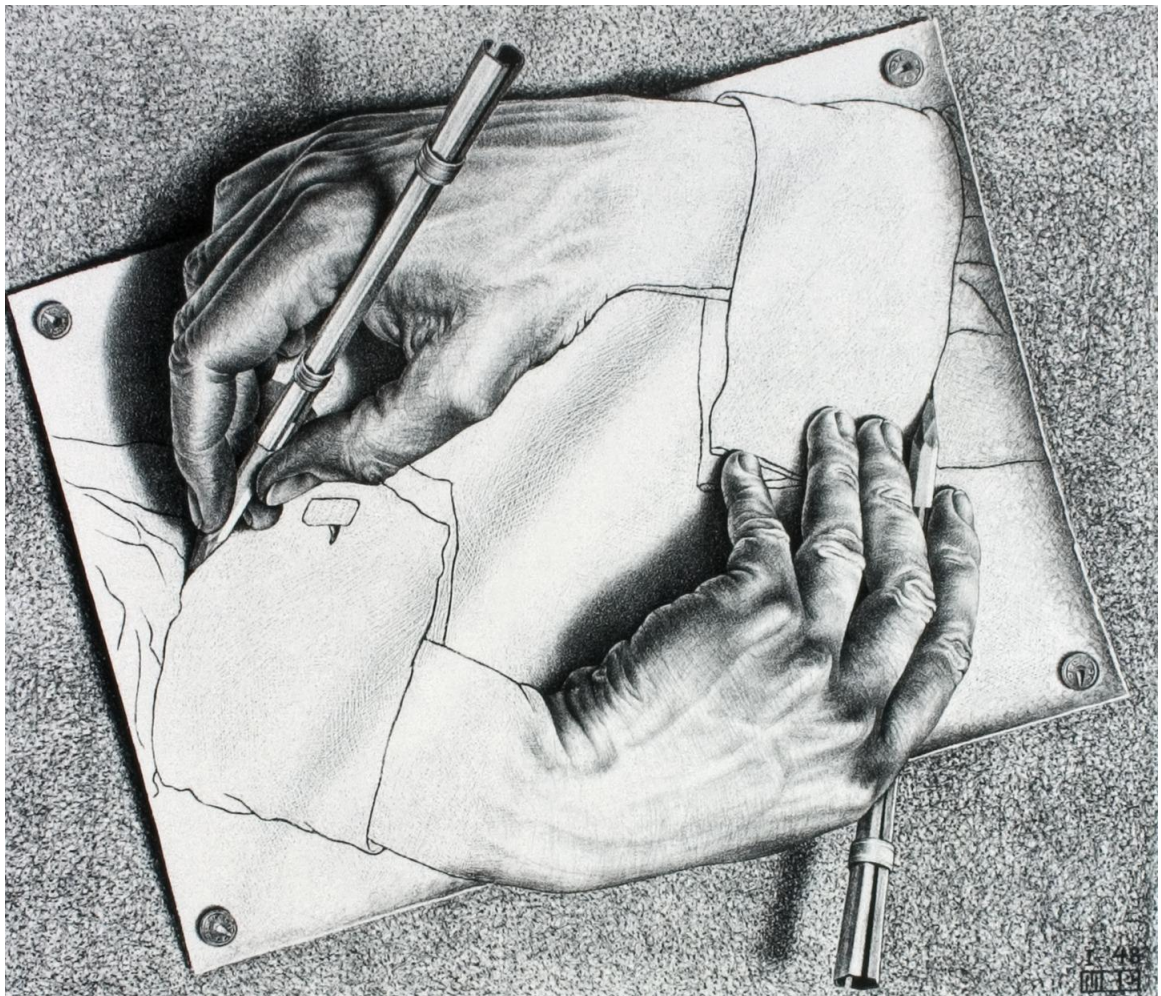


Figure 6: M. C. Escher: *Drawing Hands*, 1948, lithography, 28,5x34 cm.

Anticipating M.C. Escher's famous *Drawing Hands* (fig. 6), this marginal gesture illustrates and gives weight to the theses I have been arguing in favour of: Even the brushes, as tools of the artistic process, are made out of themselves. Like artist and audience, the tools are not exterior to the artwork, but form part of its composition. The artwork cancels the brushes' *Zuhandenheit*, their 'readiness-to-hand', as Heidegger would call it (cf. §§ 14–24), as it cancels purpose and the artist's intentions. It brings about, creates (the brushes) while at the same time qualifying their existence prior to the act of creation. Tools, 'materials', artist, viewers, themes – all become involved in the artwork's proliferating composition, all contribute to its complex net of meanings, of (simulated) resemblances, of its power to touch and capacities to make an impact. Has all that is involved in a composition like this to be called 'the material' of an artwork, *the heterogeneous material* of its *assemblage*?

Approaching materiality leads us not towards a neutral ground, not towards a first, primal material, but, paradoxically, to the middle of complicated and multiple ungrounded relationships. Is it relationships *of form*, as we probably tend to think, because these relationships are characterised by their productive interactions, with activity and productivity somehow being incompatible with our preconceived notion of material? However, there *is* nothing to be formed – except for 'other' processes of de- and re-formation. Does 'material' signify the "form's resistance to its deformation", that is to say "the thickness, texture, and force of form itself", as Jean-Luc Nancy postulates (7)? Or is material, on the contrary, the name for all the improbable but existent and happy processes of composition? Nancy's suggestion still buys into the old duality of (passive) matter and (active) form, deconstructing its hierarchy and ennobling the seemingly passive qualities of resistance and thickness to become active processes. But why not affirm materiality in its 'feminine' traits instead of emancipating it to an instance of a supporting (albeit non-creative!) counter-force, to function as defending the form of form? Luce Irigaray or Julia Kristeva might inspire us to think of materiality as a name for the motherly processes of becoming themselves, as giving and re-giving birth; as a motherly and creative engendering 'out of herself', as processes of composition, of formation, of *materialisation*, of which 'form' and 'agency' are but effects (albeit important effects!). Unlike refining and recalibrating the old duality of matter and form, affirming materiality (instead of rethinking it as a characteristic or force of form) introduces a new understanding of openness into the artistic process. As Velázquez' *Las Meninas* and Liebermann's self-portrait illustrate, the composition that engenders an artwork is not limited to the canvas and its layers of paint; it does not find its boundary in the wooden frame that separates the painting from the wall on which it is mounted. Composition is borne by conflicting forces that open up, that de-figure, that wipe out (see the rag in Liebermann's painting!) in order to generate space for new becomings. This openness of the heterogenous – that Mikhail Bakhtin, for the material of literature, the word, has described as heteroglossia (263) or "internal dialogism" (280) – is a defining trait of artworks: deciding over a painting's capacities to draw its viewers in, over its contagious power of involving different generations of recipients (Bakhtin famously calls the historical life of artworks "re-accentuation", cf. 419–422). Paradoxically, the stability and durability (some might say 'substance') that we tend to connect to the inertia, the thickness of material may, with regard to artworks, be an effect of this openness: of this capacity

to involve heterogenous others and adapt to a variety of influences. Being of weight, as a piece of art, is obviously not a question of the scales, but of a composition's capacity to touch – and be touched.

This is what we have been doing with *Las Meninas* and *Self-Portrait with Palette at the Easel*. We have to admit that the materiality of art cannot be approached, as it cannot be talked about. Approaching the materiality of art means becoming part of it, *doing* it. An artwork's composition, no matter whether of visual art, as in the examples chosen for this essay, or of literary art, composes *with* us, the recipients. If it does not – if the work of art does not touch us, does not move us, if we do not begin to interact with its riddles and complexities, there are still colours on the canvas, there is still ink on a paper or bits and bytes stored on a flash disk. 'It' is still existent, it is materially there, without a doubt – but it is not art.

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## Περίληψη

Johannes Ungelenk

### Πώς προσεγγίζεται η υλικότητα της τέχνης;

Το άρθρο απασχολεί η υλικότητα του έργου τέχνης. Αμφισβητείται εδώ η αντίληψη ότι η υλικότητα της τέχνης σχετίζεται με τα “ενεργά”, με άλλα λόγια, τα σκοπίμως χειραγωγημένα παθητικά, ουδέτερα, υλικά. Με τη χρήση παραδειγμάτων από τις εικαστικές τέχνες, υποστηρίζεται ότι η υλικότητα ενός έργου τέχνης εντοπίζεται στη σύνθεση των σχέσεων. Όπως στοχεύεται να αναδειχθεί μέσω του πίνακα *Las Meninas* του Diego Velázquez, η σύνθεση περιλαμβάνει τη σχέση του έργου τέχνης με τον παραλήπτη. Ο παραλήπτης εμπλέκεται στη σύνθεση του έργου τέχνης και συνεισφέρει στη σταθερότητα και τη διάρκειά του μέσα στον χρόνο.

Ύστερα, στο άρθρο εξετάζεται το αυτοποιητικό γνώρισμα της καλλιτεχνικής μεθόδου της σύνθεσης. Με την αναφορά στο αυτοπορτρέτο του γερμανού ζωγράφου Max Liebermann επιδιώκεται να στοιχειοθετηθεί η άποψη ότι ένα έργο τέχνης είναι στην ουσία γέννημα του εαυτού του. Όπως καταδεικνύει ο πίνακας του Liebermann με την παλέτα του καλλιτέχνη τοποθετημένη στο κέντρο του, δεν είναι απλώς ζήτημα χρωμάτων αλλά ένα “παιχνίδι” συνθέτως συγκροτημένο από εντάσεις και αποχρώσεις διαφόρων ποιτήτων που συστήνει τις έννοιες του καλλιτέχνη, του έργου τέχνης, του μοντέλου, της ομοιότητας, του εργαλείου και του υλικού. Η διαδικασία της μορφοποίησης συνοδεύεται, ωστόσο, πάντοτε από μια αντίστροφη διαδικασία “αμορφοποίησης”. Το έργο τέχνης εξακολουθεί να είναι μια σύνθεση ανοικτή, που αναμένει τη συμμετοχή/συνεργασία των μελλοντικών θεατών.