Hill Art Foundation

N. Dash, In Materials

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Historically, art material inventories documented artists' resources, commissions, and contracts. Proprietary recipes were rather more hidden, the better to preserve their alchemical aura, or at least the possibility to imagine that the maker had access to powerful trade secrets. Contemporary checklists and exhibition didactics have preserved and standardized this descriptive impulse. A typical wall label tidily shares what makes up the physical object on view. This institutional convention presumes that such a list is meaningful to the viewer irrespective of whether evidence of the process of making remains visible in the art. (Elsewhere, such material metadata has a different use value: for insurance and shipping, and ultimately conservation, attribution, and appraisal.) What is further communicated—beyond the enumeration of materials and the specific meanings associated with, say, enamel or ink—is the principle of transparency.

In N. Dash's work, materials bear traces of having been touched or structured by rituals and pragmatics of handling. Paper has been folded and refolded; pieces of cotton have been rubbed into frayed, agentive sculptures; paintings are undergirded with earth. In addition to the acrylic and oil paints and ink, one here finds nitrile gloves, cardboard corners, and Styrofoam—elements that have effectively become studio readymades, referring back to the processes that made the artworks in the first place. Organic materials—earth, rock, the literal ground that all artworks ultimately rest on—interrupt this hardware-store catalog. Together, they create a kind of therianthrope, pointing to symbiotic coexistence.

What follows is a set of working definitions of the materials that N. Dash uses. These entries establish context for the artist's materials and point beyond themselves, like

analog hyperlinks. Parsed separately, they should nevertheless be thought in contextual combination. All materials are relational.

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Acrylic paint: pigment suspended in an emulsion or binder of acrylic resin, making it effectively a liquid plastic. It was developed in the mid-twentieth century from synthetic petroleum-derived polymer emulsions and sold as Magna, Aquatec, and other brand names. (This was a century after the invention of paint tubes—an improvement on the leaking pig bladders and fragile glass containers that had first made paint portable.) Fast drying and capable of achieving many effects, from thin, watercolor-like veils to thick impasto masses, acrylic paint can bind to almost any surface, making it notable for its near-pathological drive to attachment that survives both water and UV light. But it is also nonbiodegradable, and thus a cause of microplastic pollution.

(See: Jack Whitten, Kappa I*, 1976)*

Agricultural netting: an industrial textile used in farming to protect crops from birds, insects, and harsh weather, or to support vines. As mosquito netting, it protects the body from insects. As given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, its first entry, from the sixteenth century, is nautical: "a coarse network of small ropes used now or formerly for various purposes, as to prevent boarding, keep off splinters or falling spars, stow hammocks or sails, etc." The meshwork—its weave made of different materials, but today commonly polyethylene—has been tapped for yet other purposes as well, including sunshades and trellis mesh. In fine art it has been used as a framework, a matrix, or a semitransparent window. Its structure might be likened to the modernist grid, to maps, or to the vast fields of modern agribusiness.

(See: Senga Nengudi, works from the series R.S.V.P. (Répondez s'il vous plaît)*, late 1970s)*

Cardboard corners: simple V shapes used in packaging and shipping as low-cost edge and/or corner protectors, physical barriers against product-encasing chains, straps, or slings, for instance for the shipment and storage of frames and furniture. (Cardboard itself is thick tree pulp or recycled paper or pasteboard.) Beyond logistical applications where their prime purpose is to bolster an object's structural integrity, cardboard corners have served as tools for circulating art and for making it, for instance in model making and maquettes; as collage or readymade; as installation joints; or for stacked, modular sculptural units that might suggest a spine or an umbilical cord, a bodily architecture. In all of these uses, the corners offer a meta commentary on the circulation of commodities in the global market.

(See: Frank Gehry, Grandpa Beaver*, 1987)*

Canvas: unbleached cloth woven from hemp or flax. Its strength makes possible its various historical maritime and military uses, for example as tents and ship sails. Its role in the history of art since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries has been so central that it is functionally synonymous with the term "painting." Venetian artists were the first to deploy sailcloth as a surface for painting by stretching it around a wooden armature. Canvas, which came to replace wood panels and walls (as substrate for fresco), was prized for its lightness, portability, durability, and resistance to humidity, this last factor critical in a damp environment. It allowed artists to make works at greater scale and to move them with relative ease. Canvas remains ubiquitous in art, sometimes primed with gesso, sometimes left raw, although cotton duck is a cheaper and more uniform modern alternative.

(See: Richard Tuttle, Canvas Dark Blue*, 1967)*

Earth: ground or land; soil for cultivation; surface and territory; a place of dwelling and burial, shelter and grave. As art materials, raw soils, clays, and mineral pigments dug from the ground have been put to various uses. Earth pigments were among the earliest art materials, predating recorded history; Paleolithic cave paintings were made with red

and yellow ochers, for instance. Foraged clays and minerals have been washed, sieved, and mixed with binders (among them honey, urine, animal fat, blood, sap, grease, egg, and oil) to make paints. As a material in itself, earth has also been used since at least the 1970s. This was when the environmental movement, partly inspired by the first images of Earth as a blue-green marble floating in space, helped bring the fragility of our planet's ecosystem to wide attention, conjuring a living world at once vulnerable and brutal, unruly and ordered, fallow and fecund. Exhibiting earth in art institutions points emphatically to the ecologically imperiled landscapes beyond museum walls.

(See: Meg Webster, Nearest Forest Soil*, 1987)*

Enamel: vitreous glass fused to metal and to glossy synthetic paints. It has ancient origins in the Mediterranean, with Mycenaean goldsmiths and Greek jewelry making and sculpture, and reached its apotheosis in the Byzantine empire, with gold cloisonné as the basis for intricate sacred images. Such ornamentation—also known as champlevé, painted enamel, and plique-à-jour—is also ubiquitous in Islamic and Chinese traditions, and throughout Europe, as the French terms suggest. Enamel paint was popularized in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with wide use in industry and automotive manufacturing. It came to coat household appliances like washing machines and stoves, thanks to its durability against corrosion and weathering. Modern formulations include synthetic, oil-based, and acrylic paints that dry with a hard, glossy finish, their properties suitable for signs and outdoor sculptures, in some instances mirroring and distorting their surroundings.

(See: Paul Sietsema, Red Painting*, 2014)*

Graphite: a crystalline form of carbon, first recognized as a useful drawing material in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries after large deposits were found in England's Lake District; it was initially called plumbago. Encased in wood as the modern pencil by the late eighteenth century, graphite became the principal medium for drawing, sketching, and drafting, capable of achieving a range of tonal effects, from light gray to deep black,

as well as all sorts of line types and shadings. Historically, artists have employed graphite for preparatory drawings, giving it a reputation as a minor material in comparison to (for instance) oil paint. The uses of graphite have expanded beyond mark making to include coating, dusting, and texturing surfaces, rendering it both visual and tactile. Its easy erasure appeals for reasons beyond the practical, evoking the impermanence of the natural world, and our own mortality.

(See: Vija Celmins, Untitled (Ocean)*, 1968)*

Ink: broadly defined as a water-based colored medium deriving from plants and minerals. In China and Egypt, inks were made from soot (carbon) and animal glue or gum. In the Mediterranean, cuttlefish were harvested for sepia, a brown ink. In use for more than five thousand years and counting, ink is well suited for writing, calligraphy, drawing, painting, and, in a more viscous form, printing. Indeed, through processes of woodcut, etching, and lithography, ink transferred to paper makes possible reproducible images. Concentrated or diluted ink can be applied to a surface, with different tools creating variously crisp or fluid results, to cover areas small or large. It can be applied through fine screen stencils, as in silkscreen, and used in inkjet printing, where microscopic droplets of cyan, magenta, yellow, and black ink are sprayed onto a variety of supports.

(See: Julia Wachtel, Blind Hole*, 2020)*

Nitrile glove: synthetic rubber disposable hand coverings, descended from the rubber gloves that emerged in the nineteenth century thanks to the invention of vulcanized rubber. Nitrile gloves are durable and puncture resistant—important attributes for their use in medical, laboratory, industrial, and food-service applications, where protection against infection and contamination is crucial. They are also resistant to tears and abrasions, and chemicals such as solvents. Since they are thin enough for the wearer to maintain tactile sensitivity, they have become a mundane yet important element of protective wear for studio work. As such, they also may be understood as a sign of that work, evoking safety, care, and the body.

(See: Meret Oppenheim, Fur Gloves with Wooden Fingers*, 1936)*

Oil paint: made by mixing oil with pigment, the former as a binder for the latter. The oldest known oil paintings are seventh-century Buddhist murals in Bamian, Afghanistan, made with walnut and poppy oils. The use of flax-derived linseed oil specifically in northern Europe in the fifteenth century, and then egg tempera farther south during the Renaissance, contributed to the popularization of oil painting. Slow to dry, oil paint makes revision and exactitude possible, and its rich color can be deposited in daubs or spread in thin glazes to build a luminous and translucent surface. It enables artists to model their subjects with detailed, lifelike representations. Oil painting skills were codified in manuals and propagated through workshops and academies as easel painting dominated Western art over the next centuries. Under modernism, the entire painting tradition came under sustained attack from artists and critics alike, throwing it into crisis until the contemporary period, when it has seen numerous revivals, while remaining a contested form of art making.

(See: Charline von Heyl, Vipers*, 2022)*

Rock: a hard mass of mineral aggregates and organic matter that forms the topographic contours of our planet, often covered in vegetation, soil, sand, and sea. Rocks served as surfaces for Paleolithic cave art, and as three-dimensional matter they have been gathered and balanced as megaliths, carved into funerary and public sculptures, or left as monuments in their own right, sometimes to be venerated. Different stones, such as marble, basalt, limestone, sandstone, and jade, have been valued for different qualities, among them their relative hardness, their grain, and their color, the last of which also serves to inspire symbolic associations. For example, lapis lazuli, an intensely blue metamorphic rock ground to make ultramarine pigment, was associated with heaven and divinity and used to paint the Virgin Mary's robe in medieval and Renaissance art. In land art, rocks are emblems of site, the heaviness of time, and the singularity of form—a manifestation of geological memory and a receptacle for energy.

(See: Omphalos of Delphi, date unknown)

Straightedge ruler: evolved from ancient measuring rods; in Egypt and Babylonia, it was often used together with string lines to lay out foundations, survey land, and align building components. This term emerged in the nineteenth century, when such devices came to refer to a bar with one edge made straight for drawing. As this suggests, rulers became essential in drafting, composition, and precise mark making, as well as checking the flatness of surfaces. They now are often made of heavy-duty anodized aluminum or stainless steel, for durability and resistance to rust. Artists and designers use straightedges for architectural drawing, perspective construction, collage cuts, tearing paper, and making precise geometric lines. Straightedges can double as performative instruments (scoring) or as references to measurement, control, and industrial production. Placed on its side, it becomes a flat horizon, a knife's edge that catches and redistributes light.

(See: Jasper Johns, Device*, 1961–62)*

Stick: a twig or branch broken from a tree. It may still bear traces of abscission scars, indications of where leaves were once attached. One of its earliest uses in art was as a kind of found brush—a primitive tool for drawing or painting, and possibly a prosthetic to extend the reach of a person's arm. Sticks, sometimes carved with decorations, were also fashioned into figurines and wielded as ritual objects, as well as collected for architectural uses such as markers and shelters. As with earth and rocks, sticks have been incorporated into assemblage practices and into Land art, where as a material they suggest the unruliness of nature, or deterioration and decay, but also growth, sustenance, and shelter. Think also of a spear—a weapon—or a broomstick—an implement for cleaning up.

(See: Rebecca Horn, Finger Gloves*, 1972)*

String: a line, cord, or thread made from plant fibers (jute, flax, hemp, cotton), animal fibers (silk, wool), or synthetic fibers (nylon, polyester), braided or spun together. It has ancient origins in cordage used for binding and attaching, tracing and fishing, sewing and stringing beads, rigging and measuring, suspending and catapulting, securing parcels and setting a snare. (The *Oxford English Dictionary* reminds us that it is also, figuratively, a "limitation, condition, or restriction attached to something," as in "strings attached.") Given its capacity for vibration when pulled taut, string is used in many different musical instruments. In art it has historically been used for fastening and bookbinding, and in textile traditions and cartographic mapping systems. In modern art it has been used to draw in space and define pathways.

(See: Zoe Leonard, Strange Fruit*, 1992–97)*

Styrofoam: invented in the mid-twentieth century as a lightweight, water-resistant, buoyant, impact-resistant material for building docks, insulating homes, and packaging and shipping materials. Artists have adopted it for model making, sculpture armatures, and inexpensive large-scale forms because it is easy to carve, shape, and glue. Its more quotidian proliferation in packing peanuts and coffee cups have made it a ready signifier for mass production. Realization of the environmental consequences of its manufacture (ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons) and its health impacts on workers exposed to it (it is carcinogenic, among other negatives) has led to a search for alternatives. Nonbiodegradable and toxic, it remains in landfills and in vast, drifting islands of plastic waste in the oceans, polluting the food chain. Elsewhere, it keeps a work of art off the floor, propping up art.

(See: Robert Ryman, Varese Wall*, 1975)*