



4.1 Joseph Beuys, *Fat Chair*, 1964. Wood, fat, metal, 110 × 47 × 42 cm. Darmstadt: Hessisches Landesmuseum. Photo: © 2004 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn/Hessisches Landesmuseum.

TACTILITY: THE INTERROGATION OF MEDIUM IN ART OF THE 1960S

ALEX POTTS

Medium specificity, after having been a ruling orthodoxy and also something of an obsession among the promoters of modern art in the mid-twentieth century, is now seen as largely irrelevant to contemporary art practice. Painting and sculpture have ceased to enjoy the status they had before as the fundamental medium-based categories for defining genres of artistic activity. In a multimedia art world, they represent at most two possibilities among many for approaching the business of art-making, even if they may linger on in art-educational establishments as convenient ways of organizing studio provision. The situation has reached the point where postmodern celebrations of the supposedly new artistic freedoms gained by moving beyond the closures of traditional medium-based understandings of art have lost any real sense of urgency and have themselves become conventional orthodoxies.

Still, there has of late been a return to a critical interrogation of medium, even if it is uneasy and deeply ambivalent. At one level, this new preoccupation with medium entails a desire, occasionally coloured by nostalgia, to re-engage with modernist artists' 'stress on the physical, technical facts of the medium they were working in', to use Tim Clark's phrase from his recent article 'Modernism, Postmodernism and Steam'.¹ Equally, it is clear that the modernist privileging of medium and medium specificity is hardly the place to which to turn if one wants to offer a cogent critique of the consumerism endemic to so much multimedia work. Clark, for example, is at pains to point out that the mechanisms whereby images and messages are generated and circulated in present-day society have changed very substantially from those prevailing at the moment when a modernist formalism held sway among many of the more committed and radical artists. This means that the strategies of these artists, and the imaginative impulses that fuelled their work – whether dystopian or utopian – can no longer have any real grip on the realities of today's society of the spectacle. For Clark, there is a serious loss involved, in that the contemporary art world seems to lack any remotely compelling equivalent to the politicized convictions and aspirations that sustained the earlier critical engagement with medium.

By contrast, Rosalind Krauss's ambivalence is shot through with an outright distaste for the modernist privileging of medium and medium specificity. Her diagnosis of the significance – and insignificance – of medium in the preface to her essay "*A Voyage on the North Sea*": *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* is profoundly conflicted, caught between her now long-standing antagonism to the Greenbergian doxa of medium specificity, and her more recently acquired aversion to the spectacularizing effects of the post-medium art that has gained ascendancy over the past couple of decades. She begins: 'At first I thought I could simply draw a line under the word *medium*, bury it like so much critical toxic waste, and walk away from it into a world of lexical freedom. "Medium" seemed too contaminated, too ideologically, too dogmatically, too discursively loaded.'² But she finds she still needs to invoke it if she is to think her way out of the dead end where the postmodernism she had initially embraced now finds itself: '... if I have decided in the end to retain the word 'medium', it is because for all the misunderstandings and abuses attached to it, this is the term that opens onto the discursive field that I want to address.'³

Krauss's profoundly negative ambivalence may mean that she cannot offer as cogent and compelling a case as Clark does for rethinking issues of medium. At the same time what is striking is the shared sense of urgency with which each addresses these issues. Both envisage a critical re-engagement with medium as a possible way of getting beyond the worn-out mind-set of mainstream postmodernism – with its endless alternations between expressions of dithyrambic gloom over, ecstatic fascination with and lofty contemplation of the invasion of the art world by the culture industry and the ebb and flow of images and things shaping the fabric of everyday life in late-capitalist society. Both Krauss and Clark want to buck the trend, and imagine for contemporary art practice a way of marking out some alternative to this immersion in a postmodern, post-medium state of things.

This article addresses the larger issues raised by changing attitudes to medium over the past few decades by looking back to the 1960s to a body of work located historically on a cusp between medium-based and post-medium conceptions of art. The work is characteristically sculptural because of its focus on the tactile substance of objects and materials and the literal properties of its medium. At the same time, through this very focus, it negates traditional conceptions of sculptural form that were seen to constitute sculpture as distinctive artistic medium. More than at any other time in the history of modern art, medium – both in its formal sense, and in the sense of the physical matter from which a work was made – presented itself as a key concern. At the same time, more perceptive critics and artists of the time are very contradictory on the subject. On the one hand there is a privileging of medium and the literal materiality of the art work, and on the other, a powerful impulse to move beyond the constraints of medium as traditionally defined,⁴ to the point where the formal categorization of works of art as either painting or sculpture begins to seem irrelevant.

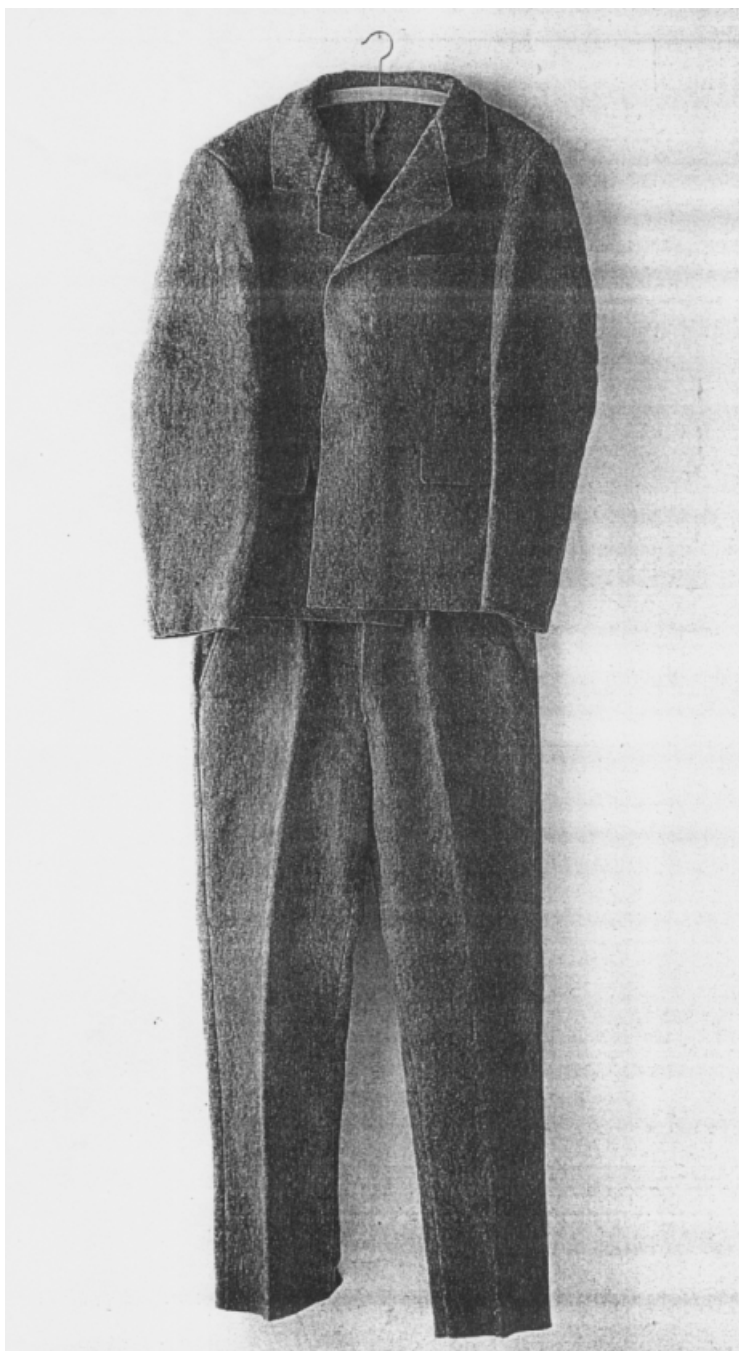


4.2 Joseph Beuys, *Fond III*, 1969. Nine felt piles with copper plates, 110 × 100 × 200 cm (left) and *Fond IV*, 1975/79 (right). Beacon, New York: DIA. Photo: © 2004 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn/DIA Art Foundation.

By the early 1970s the proliferation of new practices, such as video and film and performance, had reached the point where most art colleges in Britain at least had to make space for special studios to house a hybrid category called alternative media. This supplementary category has now expanded to the point where it subsumes traditional forms of object- and image-making. Mathew Barney's recent one-man show at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, with its ambitiously conceived, hybrid spectacle of video screenings, installations, images and scenic props,⁵ exemplifies this post-medium condition very dramatically, particularly when it is noted that this same space had housed shows celebrating the modern motor bicycle and the fashion designer Giorgio Armani. In these circumstances, sculpture, the haptic three-dimensional art, the art of things and objects, is everywhere and nowhere: everywhere in that objects and three-dimensional props are standard features of contemporary art installations; nowhere in that these displays are rarely conceived as falling into the category of sculpture.

At that moment in the 1960s when the tensions between the modernist insistence on medium specificity and the avant-garde negation of traditional medium-based categories had become particularly acute, sculpture was simultaneously very much a going concern and on its last legs, depending upon which perspective was adopted. In its more dramatic moments of self-dissolution, as in work such as that by Joseph Beuys, which confronts the viewer with simple, almost formless blocks or arrays of very ordinary, casually disposed materials, not only is attention so focused on the material properties of a particular medium that this almost becomes the very *raison-d'être* of the work (plates 4.1 and 4.2). There is also an insistent privileging of an arena of sensory experience traditionally seen to distinguish sculpture from painting, notably tactility. However, instead of tactile values being brought to bear to enhance the work's plastic form, what occurs is almost the opposite. The vividly felt sense of tactility displaces any immediate apprehension of structural qualities associated with sculpture as an art form.

Such a focus on the tactile, then, both hypostatizes and desubstantiates the qualities normally associated with sculpture: hypostatizes because the viewer's experience of the work is so strongly infused by suggestions of tactile sensation (whereas the material qualities and surface texture of bronze casts are never focused on obsessively in this way); desubstantiates because the structural underpinnings associated with plastic form are rendered largely redundant to allow for an almost untrammelled immersion on the part of the viewer in a sense of material texture and substance.⁶ The piles of felt in Beuys's *Fond III* (plate 4.2), the agglomerations of fat in *Fat Chair* (plate 4.1), are simply shaped lumps of matter that hardly seem subject to some internal structuring – the shape turns out the way it does because of a piling or agglomeration of pliable matter. In his own commentary on his art, Beuys took a militantly anti-formalist stance. His notion of a social sculpture was designed to invoke a very broadly conceived reshaping of the material and social fabric of the world that was radically at odds with the



4.3 Joseph Beuys, *Felt Suit*, 1970. Felt, sewn, stamped, 170 × 60 cm. Cambridge, Mass.: Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University. The Willy and Charlotte Reber Collection, Patrons of the Busch-Reisinger Museum Fund. Photo: Michael A. Nedzweski. © 2004 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn/Presidents and Fellows of Harvard College.



4.4 Claes Oldenburg, *Soft Switches*, 1964. Vinyl filled with Dacron and canvas, 148 × 148 × 29 cm. Kansas City: Nelson Atkins Museum of Art Missouri. (Gift of the Chapin Family in memory of Susan Chapin Buckwalter).

imperatives associated with traditional ideas of sculptural or plastic form.⁷ The direct presentation of simple objects and materials in his work effectively throws into question an idea central to traditional understandings of medium – the idea that the process of making a work of art endows some unformed, relatively inchoate material or medium with a compelling structure that operates in harmony with the physical qualities of the medium being used. This negation of the armature conventionally associated with sculptural or plastic form is played out in a particularly literal way in his slightly later *Felt Suit* (plate 4.3), a hybrid between an image and a sculpture that dangles instead of standing up. Here the internal armature of the body that underpins traditional figurative work has been pointedly eradicated; and in so much as the work has a form of a kind, it is an image form rather than sculptural form. Wearing it so as to endow it with sculptural shape would only stretch and disfigure the neat slabs of fibrous felt, resulting in an object that, hung up once again, would have lost much of its definition and would begin to look like a used, somewhat inchoate bundle of material.⁸



4.5 Claes Oldenburg, *Floor Cake*, 1962. Canvas filled with foam rubber and cardboard boxes, painted with synthetic polymer paint and latex, 148 × 290 × 148 cm. New York: Museum of Modern Art.

At the same time, there is in the Beuys works the blurred shadow of a sculptural armature – suggested by the notional human figure that might wear *Felt Suit* and stand up inside it, or by the geometric boundaries of the lumps or piles of material in the other two works. In the case of a contemporary work by Claes Oldenburg, that similarly fuses an intensified tactility with an effacing of sculptural form, his *Soft Switches* (plate 4.4), the rigidly articulated form shadowing the shiny, sagging array was actually realized in a companion sculpture, the *Hard Switches*.⁹ The suggestion of an absent armature in the soft version permeates the immediate sensation the spectator has of the overblown, pliable object, giving its immediate tactility a virtual structuring very different from what it actually is as material thing. But most striking is the way any sense of immediate, seemingly simple, highly focused tactility, in the case of the *Soft Switches*, is split between the literal material qualities of the thing seen – the soft, shiny-skinned thing that has too little internal stuffing to sustain a filled-out three-dimensional shape – and the sense of the small and rigid plastic fitting that is not seen. The ambiguities of effect operate in several registers when Oldenburg presents the viewer with objects that are monstrous and amorphously tactile versions of small things we

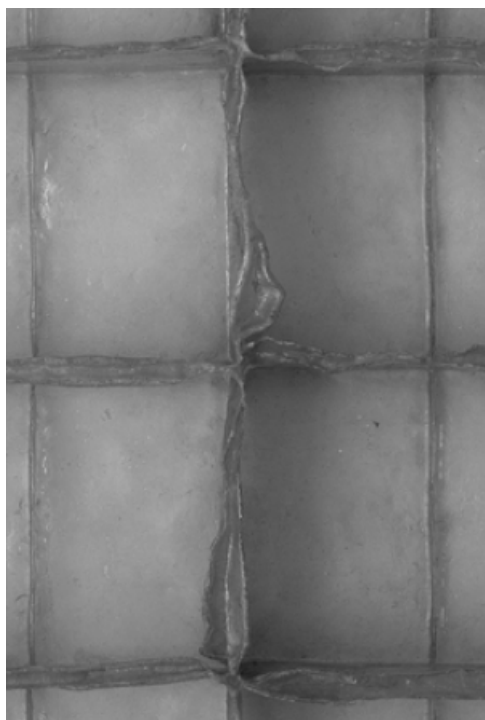


4.6 Eva Hesse, *Contingent*, 1969. Fibreglass and polyester resin, latex and cheesecloth, eight units, each 290–427 × 91–122 cm. Canberra: National Gallery of Australia. © The Estate of Eva Hesse/Hauser & Wirth, Zurich and London/National Gallery of Australia.

manipulate with our fingers so easily in our everyday life that we hardly think of them as tactile: objects such as light switches, clothespegs, or readymade, hand-size pieces of food. When we glance at his giant, slightly floppy *Floor Cake* (plate 4.5), for example, we feel it so vividly as a thing we might pick up and eat partly because it is so incongruously and unmanageably huge. Our being engulfed and disgusted by vicarious sensations of holding and biting into it are paradoxically provoked by its being physically enlarged to the point where it would be literally unhandlable. There is also the pointed uneatability of its material substance or 'medium' – the surfaces of paint-covered canvas are intriguingly closely allied to painting at a literal level while at the same time blocking any sense of painterly illusion.

Eva Hesse, perhaps more compellingly than any other artist working in the 1960s, leads her audience into an intriguingly absurd world of tactile immediacy that is simultaneously literal and virtual, palpably simple and not quite what it purports to be. Like a lot of process-oriented art, her work tends to unhinge tactility from plastic form, as if to make the imagined felt encounter with it simpler and more real. Equally, the impression is given that the processes of generating the work could not be more straightforward – resin poured over fibreglass, or latex over cheesecloth (plate 4.6). However, many of the surfaces carry the imprint of a mould that is no longer there, whether this be the coarsely rumpled plastic on which she set the pliable, resin-impregnated fibreglass to harden when fabricating the rigid upper and lower sections of *Contingent* (plate 4.6), or the rectangular box around which the pieces of fibreglass soaked and coated in resin were allowed to set in *Sans II* (plate 4.7), or the smooth-out sheets of plastic on which the latex-impregnated cheesecloth suspended between the fibreglass poles of *Expanded Expansion* (plate 4.8) was moulded.¹⁰

The tactility of the surfaces of these works, which are made from simple combinations of basic materials, often applied in liquid form and then allowed to harden, is both immediately felt, and also somewhat elusive.¹¹ There is often an intriguing intermingling of fluidity and rigidity: *Sans II* (plate 4.7) almost seems to drip and flow in places, even though it is absolutely rigid.

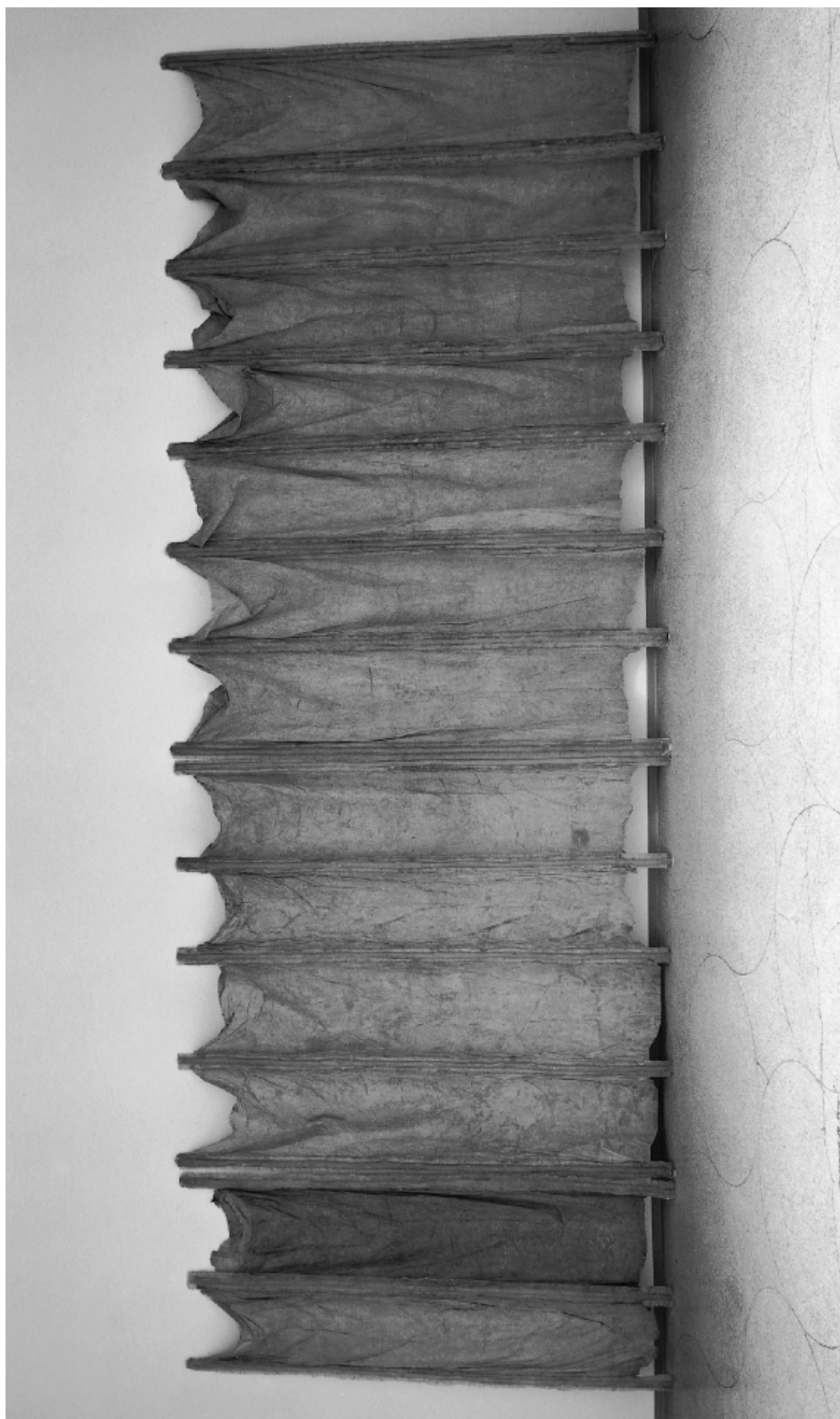


4.7 Detail of Eva Hesse, *Sans II*, 1968. Fibreglass and polyester resin, five units, each 97 × 218 × 16 cm. Photo: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. © The Estate of Eva Hesse/Hauser & Wirth, Zurich and London.

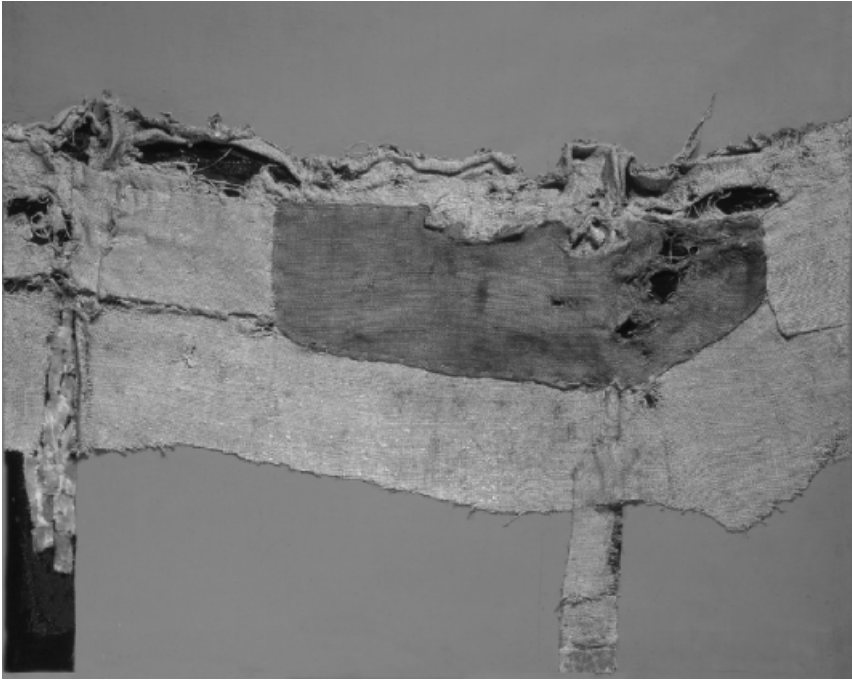
The light markings on the pliable latex hangings in *Expanded Expansion* (plate 4.8) are traces of creases in the plastic sheets that functioned as a support while the liquid latex was hardening, and from which it was peeled away. Then there are the striking optical effects in many of her works created by light shining through and reflecting from the partly translucent fibreglass and latex, at least when it is reasonably well preserved. Such surfaces feel so sensuous because of visual effects that could never literally be felt and which make the surfaces almost seem to disappear as tangible things. They acquire much of their substance from phenomena that would be impossible to grasp – from the transient effects of light and shade, from the forms of temporary moulds of which only traces are visible, from the fluid pourings and dangleings of pliable matter that have now congealed. The complex interplay of vividly felt material substance and elusive impalpability generates a peculiarly resonant sense of being alive to a world simultaneously felt and seen that is neither entirely malleable nor rigidly structured.

Jannis Kounellis's displays of solid-looking, substantive piles of common material may share with Hesse's works the focus on material substance or 'medium'. However, at first sight their inertness would seem to be radically at odds with her subtle and strange fusions of fluidity and solidity. His *Untitled*, dating from 1967, and consisting of simple pieces of coal arrayed in a flat metal bin, is at one level just a collection of black, dirty, dusty lumps, unpleasant to touch and obdurately inanimate. But framed and displayed in this way so as to draw attention to itself, the array of material begins to generate a rather different effect on the viewer. Becoming absorbed in looking at it as one never would normally a pile of coal, and pondering its material make-up, one begins to be aware of its potential to be transformed into something else. The coal's lumpy materiality gives way to suggestions of an impalpable phenomenon – hot, evanescent flames and embers – that this material could, and is usually destined, to become. Here an array of things simultaneously manifests itself as palpably inert and as the source of a sustained, slow-burning conflagration.

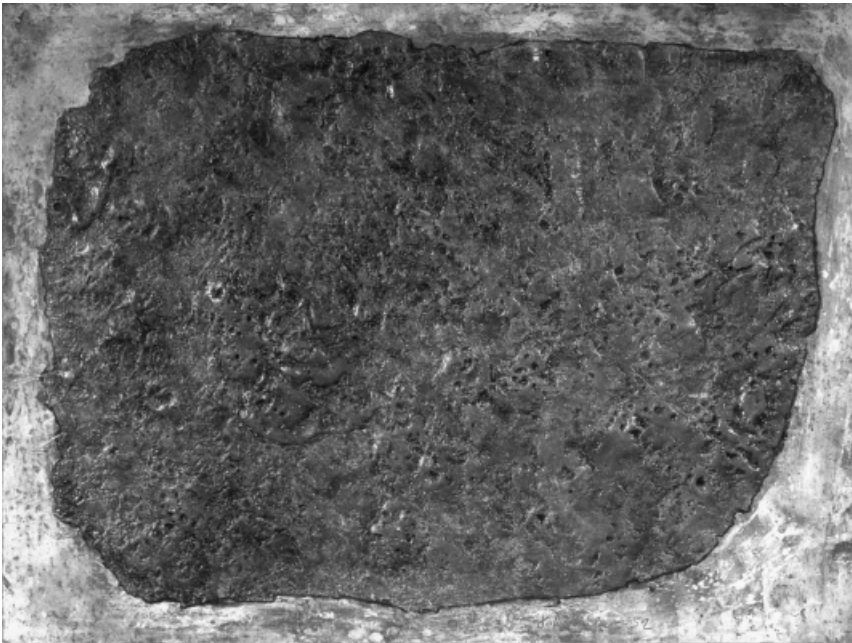
Such a focus on the tactile qualities of substances and things emerged in postwar painting earlier on than in sculpture. It was with the collage aesthetic that gained ascendancy in painting in the 1940s and 1950s that a viewer's attention began to be directed in the first instance to the literal physical properties of the materials used in a work rather than its formal structuring. In paintings such as Alberto Burri's *Sacco e Rosso* (plate 4.9), bits of opaque and highly textured raw matter are stuck directly to the canvas support, and the paint itself is often applied in such a way that its material density predominates over the effects of translucence and luminosity normally associated with the art of painting.¹² At this juncture sculptors for the most part continued to present their finished works in traditional cast bronze, giving an artistic gloss to the collage of different substances and objects with which they experimented in their models (see plate 4.11). The English critic Adrian Stokes, writing in the mid-1960s, used the painterly term collage, rather than an object-based term, to characterize the postwar



4.8 Eva Hesse, *Expanded Expansion*, 1969. Reinforced fibreglass poles and rubberized cheesecloth, three units of 3, 5 and 8 poles: 310 × 152.4 cm, 310 × 304.8 cm, 310 × 457.2 cm. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Gift, family of Eva Hesse. Photo: David Heald, courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. © The Estate of Eva Hesse/Hauser & Wirth, Zurich and London.



4.9 Alberto Burri, *Sacco e Rosso*, 1954. Acrylic and hessian collage on canvas, 86 × 100 cm. London: Tate Modern. © Tate, London/Art Resource, New York.



4.10 Jean Dubuffet, *Stone of Dordogne*, 1952. Oil on canvas, 91 × 122 cm. Private collection, USA. © 2004 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP/Fondation Dubuffet, Paris.

cult of 'ordinary objects (and substances) ... stripped or cleaned of our easier modes of appropriation by projection'.¹³ Even the *objet trouvé* was, for him, best envisaged within the category of collage,¹⁴ a form of art characterized by 'the employment of actual, formed objects or of an unexpected weighty substance as implements of the urgent spirit, however vague its voice', and by the attempt 'to make capital out of the fugitive propensities of matter, to harness decay or destruction to the purposes of art, a pile of distorted mineral rubbish'. In this connection he cited specifically 'the actuality of heavy sanded surfaces' in the paintings of Jean Dubuffet (plate 4.10) and Antoni Tàpies.¹⁵

David Smith's 'generous steel constructions', his 'delicately abraded piles of cubes' that Stokes singled out as enlivening 'our sense of a substance (steel) forced on us today',¹⁶ were envisaged by him not so much as sculpture as collage. Other leading sculptors of the time, such as Henry Moore and Alberto Giacometti, who by contrast with Smith mostly worked within the mediations of bronze casting, were nevertheless interested in foregrounding a strongly tactile sense of the materials they used to fashion their models. Their fine-quality bronze castings often functioned to offer up the trace or imprint of very different, suggestively textured surfaces fabricated by working directly in a malleable material such as plaster. When inspected



4.11 (right) Eduardo Paolozzi, *St Sebastian II*, 1957. Bronze, height 215 cm. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Photo: David Heald, courtesy of Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. © 2004 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London.

closely, the surfaces of Giacometti's work of the 1940s and 1950s display a striking diversity of effects: there are areas that give the vivid sense of a fluid modelling of wet plaster, and others that betray the scratchiness and crumbliness produced by abrading or cutting into lumps of dried-out or half-dried-out plaster.¹⁷ With Moore's sculpture of the period, such as the famous *Falling Warrior* (plate 4.12), striking alternations of smooth to rough are produced as broadly modelled surfaces that are interrupted by abrasions and pock marks and incrustations produced by working on and adding layers to the plaster after it had dried.¹⁸

The focus on the tactile qualities of substances discussed here might be seen as developing out of a characteristically modernist preoccupation with medium. But there are significant differences. This particular preoccupation with materiality is hardly to be equated with the earlier modernist ethos of truth to materials, where the artist was imagined as creating significant new forms by working in harmony with the inner substance of his or her medium.¹⁹ Neither is the preoccupation with what traditionally would have been understood by medium specificity. Medium specificity was not just about the physical properties of a medium and the fabricating processes most easily adapted to shaping it. Above all it had to do with a structuring appropriate to the formal characteristics of a generic medium: whether it be defined as coloured pigment applied to a flat surface in such a way as to generate a picture, or as solid stuff shaped and manipulated (modelled, carved or constructed) in such a way as to produce a convincing freestanding sculpture. Understandings of medium specificity were usually grounded in structurings seen to be inherent to the mind's way of processing the distinctive sensory effects produced by a medium.²⁰ When, in the work discussed here, the focus on tactility was taken to the point where all that seemed to matter was the substance and manipulability of the raw materials employed, the formal imperatives underpinning the traditional ideas of medium specificity were effectively rendered redundant. Medium specificity was, as it were, driven to an end point where it almost disappeared, whether as framing constraint or generative principle. With some of the more radically unformalized process works, such as Robert Morris's arrays of material scattered on the floor (plate 4.13), the result was interestingly a visual spectacle that could readily appeal to a pictorial imagination, and made much of its impact on its audience in the form of a picture.²¹

The more extreme forms of modernist insistence on medium specificity almost arrived at the same endpoint. Clement Greenberg's attempt to pare down painting's essence to the irreducible elements of 'flatness and the delimitation of flatness' led him to make the notorious suggestion, in his essay 'After Abstract Expressionism' in 1962, that perhaps 'a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture.'²² Greenberg, of course, had in mind the minimal formal requirements of a flat, rectilinear support that would underpin a pictorial field. He was not talking about some intriguingly textured scrap of canvas pinned up and hanging on the wall.



4.12 Detail of Henry Moore, *Falling Warrior*, 1957. Bronze, length 147 cm. Perry Green: Henry Moore Foundation.
Photo: Henry Moore, by permission of the Henry Moore Foundation.



4.13 Robert Morris, *Untitled (Threadwaste)*, 1968. Fabric, copper, tar, mirrors. Photo: Rudolf Burkhardt, courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery, New York. © 2004 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/Robert Morris/Leo Castelli Gallery.

Greenberg envisaged the art work as being structured by very basic visual qualities that, in his neo-Kantian view of things, governed how we saw the material world, namely form, colour and optical effect. As a result, the qualities of substance and materiality that fascinated artists such as Beuys were considered by him to be formally irrelevant. Indeed, he came to the conclusion that sculpture as a visual art was perhaps best seen as another form of painting, a drawing in space. His conception of a true modernist sculpture was such that any vividly tactile qualities would just be intrusions from another, non-visual sphere of experience.²³ What was to disappear most categorically from a post-1960s, post-medium art world, then, was not so much the concern with medium as such, but the category of sculpture. In an albeit faltering way, painting continued to exist as a bundle of practices and structurings geared to making images by applying pigments and marks, whether manually or mechanically, to a flat support. Moreover, a lot of the new three-dimensional work was effectively assimilated into the parameters of two-dimensional image-making through being presented photographically.

This brings me to consider an important historical condition of the privileging of the tactile qualities of substances and things in certain forms of quasi-

sculptural work produced in the 1960s. This moment has been characterized historically as marking a transition to a post-industrial, post-productivist age.²⁴ Traditional understandings of economic activity in terms of industrial production began to give way to a focus on consumption and on the more intangible operations of information and image circulation. Well into the 1960s, however, prevailing conceptions of the workings of the economy were still dominated by images of industrial production, including traditional heavy industry as well as the mass production of new materials and gadgets for a domestic market. Steel and coal continued to be envisaged as basic to modern industry – the world’s largest steel smelting plants and coal-fired power stations were built in the postwar period – at the same time that novel, synthetic materials such as latex, perspex and vinyl – with which artists began to experiment in the 1960s – were exciting attention and being deployed in the making of lightweight items and fittings for the domestic market and also being exploited in the new DIY craze that sent people to the hardware store.²⁵ In the work discussed here, the artists drew on a range of industrially produced and widely distributed materials, from the standardized sheets of thick industrial felt used for insulation and wrapping and the coal and steel of traditional industry, to newer, lightweight materials, such as fibreglass, that could easily be cast or moulded in different shapes. While artists working in the United States were particularly well placed to draw on these latest products of modern industry, and the European artists cited here seem to have been particularly fascinated by rawer, less glossy materials that could at least give an appearance of patina, the fashion for experimenting with very modern materials, such as plastic, was no more purely an American phenomenon than was pop art.²⁶

I am not saying that these conditions of production and consumption necessarily explain the art world’s fascination with things and materials, or its hypostatizing of tactile qualities. I would maintain, however, that there is a connection. The split attitudes to medium in the art world – the fetishizing focus on materials and processes on the one hand, and the desire to be liberated from the material and formal constraints of medium specificity on the other – must bear some relation to split perceptions of the economy at the time, where a heightened fascination with processes of industrial production coexisted with a new, intensified concern with consumption and systems of exchange. The latter tendency eventually made a preoccupation with materials and processes of fabrication that carried residual associations with artisanal labour – particularly as envisaged in traditional notions of sculptural process such as carving or modelling – seem old-fashioned and marginal. This tendency really began to take off in the 1970s with the shift from studio-based handmade work either to conceptual work or work assembled from ready-made items or items fabricated by professionals to the artist’s specifications outside the studio, without the artist even necessarily having to fabricate a model, as with traditional bronze casting.²⁷

The increasing dominance of the so-called post-industrial economy, including its breaking up and geographical dispersal of processes of manufacture, which

effectively put the latter out of sight for many of the wealthier inhabitants of the Western world, must be relevant to the fact that, in the new installation-oriented art scene which took off in the 1980s, the literal connotations of the word sculpture, as a shaping of material, by modelling, carving or assemblage, have come to seem so out of date. Sculpture as a medium has been liquidated, even if it hangs on as a convenient label. While sculpture may not be quite the word to use to describe artistic processes as varied as those of Hesse and Kounellis, there is still with each an anchoring in hands-on interaction with substances and their tactile and other material properties.

This brings me to what really separates post-medium conceptions of art from mid-twentieth-century ones focused on the materiality of things and substances. Even in the most process-oriented work of the earlier moment, work that might seem to have moved beyond the limits of a commitment to medium specificity, one very basic modernist imperative remains. Such work blocks any easy reification that would make it seem that the ideas, feelings and desires elicited by the work actually inhere in its material properties as object. The focus on the literal properties of medium provided a way of problematizing the illusions generated by the consumer economy that human ideas and desires could somehow be fully lodged in material things. The art works considered here are paradoxical entities, because they seem to offer themselves up directly to the viewer in their physical immediacy. At the same time the viewer is made very pointedly aware that any feelings or ideas that may be conjured up by these agglomerations of material are not themselves palpable or visible properties of the work. The lumps of coal in Kounellis's bin do not, of their own accord, transform themselves into flames and glowing embers. The resin in Hesse's work does not flow over the fibreglass support before our eyes. Oldenburg's soft switches may make us sense but do not actualize the small, hard, plastic switches we manipulate every day. We only wear Beuys's suit in our mind's eye, and if we donned it, we would push it out of shape.

This is not to mention the more general way in which work of this kind prompts the spectator to see very ordinary material entities as possessed of qualities that would be irrelevant to any practical dealings with them in everyday life – qualities both elusive and obvious, that belong neither quite to the established aesthetic currency of the art world nor to the commercial currency of the larger consumer economy. Most present-day installation operates very differently, and is locked into a very different economy of image and object. It usually offers up a freely disposed hybrid spectacle where the materiality of the media used is infused with obvious metaphoric resonances, or presents itself merely as transparent to the symbolic meaning of the images it configures. Medium, whether as substance or formal constraint, has largely ceased to be a generating principle of artistic production or consumption.

Some present-day critics would argue that at this juncture a new understanding of medium is needed to get any purchase on the formal and material specificities of contemporary art practice. Krauss is certainly one of these, even if

she hedges her diagnosis with a blanket condemnation of the consumerism she sees as endemic to the expanding fields of recent installation work. Such a new understanding would need to take into account, not just the literal material support of an image or the substance of an object, but also the arena of display and the modalities of consumption or viewing that this invites, just as in film the medium embraces not just the film as such, but also the projecting apparatus, the environment in which the projection takes place and the ritualized behaviour of the audience.²⁸ In this expansive definition of medium, we would have to consider the nature and symbolic resonances of a range of different objects and piles of stuff, of variously photographed, painted and drawn images, of moving projected images, and of texts, as well as of the arena of display. To caricature the situation in this way is to indicate how, in this abundant multiplicity, we lose the constitutive core of the modernist focus on medium. By attending closely to medium in the way that the modernists did, the spectator is invited to reflect on the possibilities and the limits of realizing something in material form that could carry a larger charge or significance in our encounter with it.

A Hegelian would say that we are in a sense still living in the era of the modern or romantic work of art. In the modern world, according to Hegel, the sensuous reality of the art work can never be fully adequate to the idea or state of mind generating it. This is because it is in the nature of modern ideas of the self and of the more radical modern impulses to refashion the given state of things, that these are in excess of or at odds with any empirically realizable reality. As Jacques Rancière phlegmatically formulated it in his recent discussion of modern European aesthetic theory, 'aesthetic art promises a political accomplishment it cannot satisfy, and thrives on that ambiguity.'²⁹ With the kinds of work discussed here, such ambiguity is pushed to a limit where it almost liquidates itself. The work is an everyday material thing that we see and feel immediately, but it still just foils being taken for what it literally is. Here it is possible to catch the last glimmer of a utopian phantasy originating in the aesthetic theory of the late Enlightenment, the idea that art presents its audience with a material reality where affectively charged possibilities are intimated that the actual world denies. But for this to be convincing, the art work as actual thing has in part to block easy access to the very ideas and affects it seems to realize. Otherwise it would be a fake, merely a high-quality consumer product that disguised the alienations and closures on radical possibility operating in modern culture.

The postwar work I have been discussing, that elicits from the viewer the sense of an immediate tactile engagement with things and materials, exposes this conundrum peculiarly vividly. In present circumstances, there is a need to look for something rather different from this earlier focus on medium and the literal materiality of the art work if, within the variegated images, objects, environments and spectacles presented by contemporary art, something that momentarily resists or evades our culture's free-wheeling, all-consuming processes of reification is to be identified. This something would obviously be lodged in the

materiality of the art work, but a materiality taken in the broadest sense – to include cultural phenomena, as well as images, voices, sounds and texts, in so much as these constitute the fabric of people’s everyday world nowadays. The historical moment I have been exploring was one where an intensive, critical engagement with the materiality of medium seemed to provide a basis for enacting a process of making that could defy the reifications imposed both by the culture industry and by the institutionalized art world. Rethinking medium seemed to offer a viable way of re-imagining and perhaps even remaking the world for people across the political spectrum – this was, after all, the moment that produced Marshall McLuhan’s immensely popular, eccentrically utopian and dystopian speculations on the shaping force of medium in modern culture.³⁰

We are now, however, in a situation where work that momentarily effects any remotely compelling suspension of the processes subsuming art within a late-capitalist system of value cannot readily be associated with a definable strategy or particular set of critical concerns in this way. Such a situation poses serious consequences for constituting a working ethic for a radical artistic project. However, it does not mean that a contemporary work can no longer effect some shift in the material fabric of the world we inhabit that is puzzling and incongruous and also compelling for not being fully subsumed within the operations of consumer culture. These are not revolutionary times; but neither is artistic practice, or any other cultural activity for that matter, entirely confined to the arena defined for it by hegemonic interests and values.

It is also worth remembering that the critical engagement with the materials and processes of art in the 1950s and 1960s was never a straightforward affair. For one thing, the seemingly very basic sense of tactility that such art often elicited was of its very nature deeply ambiguous. The works of art concerned were both palpably evident and ungraspable; the experience they offered both in tune with dominant conceptions of art as producing a heightened awareness of our interactions with the material world, and so literal and basic as to be resistant to such easy aesthetic appropriation. What is more, the apparently immediate engagement with substances and processes on the part of the artist was itself complicated by the processes of production, distribution and consumption in society at large that made basic materials such as industrial felt, vinyl and fibreglass so economically available that the use of them as artistic media could look very casual and experimental. The larger economy created the conditions of material abundance that made possible the open-ended, low-cost productions of artists seeking to suggest a simple reconstitution of the humanly fabricated material world that might push beyond the limits of the consumer economy whose most basic products they were exploiting. This is rather different from recent artists’ exploitation of the considerable sums of money generated by a much-expanded modern art economy to create elaborate high-production-value visual spectacles. The present moment could hardly be envisaged as one of *arte povera*.

Alex Potts

Notes

- 1 T.J. Clark, 'Modernism, Postmodernism, and Steam', *October* 100, Spring 2002, 161.
- 2 Rosalind Krauss, 'A Voyage on the North Sea': *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, London, 1999, 5.
- 3 Krauss, 'A Voyage', 7.
- 4 This impulse echoed some of the radical pronouncements made by the early twentieth-century avant garde, such as the Russian Constructivists, declaring the end of painting and fine art and the total bankruptcy of inherited bourgeois notions of artistic form.
- 5 The exhibition *Matthew Barney: the Cremaster Cycle* was held at the Guggenheim Museum, New York between 21 February and 11 June 2002. The spectacularizing effect was enhanced by the all-encompassing self-referential dramatizing of the museum space. Projected on five large screens suspended in the central rotunda of the gallery and visible to anyone looking over the balustrade of the spiral ramp was a continually looping sequence from the film *Cremaster 3*, which had been shot in this same space. Viewers were literally immersed in an all-encompassing Barney world.
- 6 Beuys's work evokes strong associations with everyday use of the materials deployed. The lump of fat in *Fat Chair* is not just a texture but something with strong bodily and also excremental associations – the fat literally threatens to envelop one's posterior were one to sit in the chair. The piled-up slabs of felt in *Fonds III* evoke ideas of impenetrable insulation, contrasting with the conducting properties of the copper plate on top.
- 7 Joseph Beuys, 'Lehbruck Speech', in *Joseph Beuys: In Memoriam Joseph Beuys, Obituaries, Essays, Speeches*, Bonn, 1986, 57 ff. On Beuys's understanding of the term *Plastik* as a larger shaping of things as distinct from a purely artistic formal principle, see Pamela Kort, 'Beuys: the profile of a successor', in Gene Ray, ed., *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy*, New York, 2001, 28.
- 8 A similar effect is achieved by the stretched and sagging felt covering that had been used by Beuys to wrap a grand piano in his piece *Infiltration-Homogen für Konzertflügel* (1964), as now displayed hanging from the wall in the Beuys Block in the Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt.
- 9 The *Hard Switches*, also dating from 1964, made of painted wood and metal, are illustrated in *Claes Oldenburg: An Anthology*, New York, 1996, 201. For an illuminating discussion of the undoing of sculptural form produced through the vivid tactility of Oldenburg's soft sculpture, see Max Kozloff, 'The Poetics of Softness', in Maurice Tuchman, ed., *American Sculpture of the Sixties*, Los Angeles, 1967, 26–9.
- 10 *Expanded Expansion* featured in the exhibition *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*, held in 1969 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. On the fabrication of the works discussed here, see Briony Fer, 'The Salvage Work: Eva Hesse's Late Works', in Elisabeth Sussman, ed., *Eva Hesse*, New Haven and San Francisco, 2002, 79–95; Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, New York, 1976, 128–9, 151, 164–5; and Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*, New Haven and London, 2000, 346–8.
- 11 See Fer, 'The Salvage Work', for a particularly suggestive analysis of this aspect of Hesse's work.
- 12 Giulio Carlo Argan, 'Alberto Burri', in *Burri*, Brussels: Palais des Beaux Arts, 1959.
- 13 Adrian Stokes, *Reflections on the Nude*, London, 1967, 30.
- 14 Collage was similarly central to Clement Greenberg's understanding of the formal imperatives of modern art, to the point that he envisaged the more significant forms of modern sculpture as developing out of cubist collage. See his 'Sculpture in our Time' (1958), in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, Chicago and London, 1993, 57–8.
- 15 Stokes, *Reflections*, 23.
- 16 Stokes, *Reflections*, 26. Stokes was probably referring to Smith's *Cubi XIX* (1964), recently acquired by Tate, London, of which Stokes was a trustee.
- 17 See, for example, Giacometti's *Man Pointing* (1947), as illustrated in Ernest Scheidegger, *Spuren einer Freundschaft: Alberto Giacometti*, Zürich, 2000, 132. These photographs of plaster models in Giacometti's studio taken by Scheidegger offer an interesting insight into the sculptor's working methods. In one case (see 84), a finished bronze cast of a tall *Standing Woman* (1948) is shown juxtaposed with plaster models of similar figures in various states of unfinish, as well as several less elongated clay figures wrapped in cloth. For a discussion of Giacometti's technique, see Alex Potts, 'Alberto Giacometti', *Burlington Magazine*, 143, November 2001, 718–20. Many sculptors of the period often worked directly in plaster rather than producing a preliminary model in clay and then casting it in plaster.
- 18 David Sylvester, *Henry Moore*, London, 1968, 127–8.
- 19 On the complexities of the cult of truth to materials in sculpture, see Penelope Curtis, 'Barbara Hepworth and the Avant Garde of the 1920s', in *Barbara Hepworth: A Retrospective*, London, 1994, 15, 19–22.

- 20 In such formal understandings of medium, the medium is not so much the literal physical matter out of which a work of art is made as the broadly defined properties of a medium or art form that structure how we apprehend the work. On how such understandings have been played out in modern ideas on the specificity of sculpture as a medium by comparison with painting, see Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, 1–3, 24–37, 62–77, 146–8, 179–81. The foundational text for such understandings, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laokoon*, published in 1766, made a systematic distinction between the effects appropriate to the visual arts and poetry on the grounds that works of visual art were apprehended as static images existing in space while works of poetry were narratives extending over time.
- 21 On Morris's *Untitled (Threadwaste)*, 1968, see Richard J. Williams, 'Apocalypse or abstraction? The photographs of Robert Morris's Threadwaste', *Sculpture Journal*, 6, 2001, 100–7.
- 22 Greenberg, *Collected Essays*, vol. 4, 131–2.
- 23 Greenberg, *Collected Essays*, vol. 4, 59–60.
- 24 The classic analysis of the interconnections between this structural shift that began to manifest itself in the economy in the 1950s and 1960s and the changes in cultural formations we now associate with postmodernism remains Frederic Jameson's article, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', in *New Left Review*, 146, July–August 1984, 53–92.
- 25 On the 'hardware shop moments' in 1960s art, see Alighiero Boetti's commentary from an interview conducted in 1972, quoted in Richard Flood and Frances Morris, eds, *Zero to Infinity: Art Povera 1962–1972*, Minneapolis, 2001, 181.
- 26 The Italian painter Alberto Burri, for example, produced a series of paintings in the 1960s using plastic cellophane, which he textured by burning and melting, following on from similar series featuring more traditional industrially produced materials such as tar, burlap and steel.
- 27 For a discussion of the interrelation between changing processes of production in the economy at large and changing attitudes to processes of making in the visual arts, see Helen Molesworth, ed., *Work Ethic*, University Park, 2003.
- 28 Krauss, 'A Voyage', 24–5.
- 29 Jacques Rancière, 'The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy', *New Left Review*, 14, second series, March–April 2002, 151. See also his *Le partage du sensible: esthétique et politique*, Paris, 2000, 26–45.
- 30 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, London, 1964.