

Materiality & Meaning/ New Hampshire/ Warren Seelig

I've written, talked about, and lectured on this subject of Materiality and Meaning many times and hardly ever know where to begin or even what to say. The way that **material** means, really comes out of having a **tacit knowledge** of it. That is, knowing about it in a way that **cannot be written about** or communicated through words or symbols. It is also connected to that behavior known as **instinct**. It is something innate which **goes deeper than how we behave through learned experience**. It's a behavior that is thought about most often by the practitioners of art, the artists themselves, and rarely of interest to the critics..... those who interpret or evaluate what we do. **For those of us who allow ourselves to be directly influenced by materiality and the physical world, instinct is a behavior that we are especially prone to trust.**

The early writing of Ellen Dissanayake in her book *What is Art For*, written 20 years ago, was possibly the first to consider the nature of artistic behavior in a global context. She did what so many then thought impossible, i.e. to set aside preconceptions of modern Western aesthetics and to consider art cross-culturally from an evolutionary perspective. **Thinking that we are biologically driven to make art.** She fully accepted the incredible diversity of humankind but was also equally impressed by the fundamental sameness. At the core of her thinking is that art making is a **bio-evolutionary necessity** inherent in all cultures. Even though boundaries and expectations do exist within each culture which influence what gets made, **instinct is fundamental as a means of shared expression.**

Thinking about the way artists rely on **instinct** directly relates to my interest in **materiality** and the main focus of this talk. For years, I have been torturing myself in an attempt to write and talk about this phenomenon of "materiality" as I experience it in myself and **as I see it** when working with students of all ages. Ultimately it is a behavior and a **need** we have as artists and human beings to connect with the physical and sensual world; a **need** which is more important today than ever in history it is an phenomenon which is best understood through the **experience of doing**.... Not talking about it!

On the other hand, it is hugely exciting to find that every where I

look, inside and out of the art world, there is talk about things relating to materiality, to the world of the physical and the need to make things. **Art and cultural critics, sociologists, neurologists, philosophers and motor cycle mechanics, industrial designers, anthropologists** are writing books about and weighing in on so much about value of working with materials and of making things by hand. Let me give you a few examples.....

Philosopher **Denis Dutton** (lives in New Zealand) recently wrote a book called ***The Art Instinct***. For years I have been especially interested in those who write about **art in a way that more broadly embraces the human condition** as a source of artmaking. I am intrigued by thinkers like Dutton who explore ideas about human expression beyond the **stifling boundaries** set by those who espouse the established theoretical and critical discourse of Western art. Dutton speaks of the art instinct as behavior which is a peculiarly human impulse that drives and underlies all human cultures. He speaks about the **universality of art** and artistic behaviors, with their spontaneous appearance occurring everywhere across the globe, through out human history. Dutton believes that artistic expression can be easily recognized across cultures and suggests that our attraction is derived from a natural innate source. The great attraction we have to things we see, sounds we make and dance we perform can easily communicate directly no matter what our cultural background. (Ellen Dissanayake is his great mentor)

Another book which caused many of us to salivate is called **Shop Class as Soul Craft**, written by Matthew Crawford who is both a philosopher and motorcycle mechanic. This guy has his Ph.d. in political philosophy from the University of Chicago and also owns and operates an independent motorcycle repair shop in the United States in Richmond, Virginia. He is critical of the way our educational system is hustling young people off into college and then to a lives in corporate cubicles as **knowledge workers**..... He rants about the **misguided separation** of thinking from doing, the work of the hand from that of the mind in an atmosphere with a clear bias of mind over matter. Crawford is the antithesis of those who see the world as increasingly disembodied to the extent that some cyber geeks dismiss the body as dead meat and merely as a container for the brain. Based on personal experience, Crawford would love to

restore honor to all of the manual trades as a life worth choosing. He is emphatic about the tremendous satisfaction which can come through engagement with the physical world and discusses the way in which knowledge may come to us through touch. He so beautifully describes his own life as a motor cycle mechanic, a job which is not only physically demanding but also **more intellectually engaging** than jobs he had which were officially recognized as knowledge work. It seems that Crawford's big worry is about the onset of "**electronic sweat shops**" and concern for how computers are transforming the office of the future into the factory of the past.... **that is, the modern workplace (cubicle) is so often a place which deadens our senses and saps our vitality in the new service economy.**

From the world of medicine comes neurologist Frank Wilson, who 10 years ago wrote a book called **The Hand**. In it he speaks indirectly but eloquently about materiality by discussing the way our lives, our thoughts and feelings are indelibly shaped by the knowledge which comes through use of the hands. His mission for writing this book (he says) was to expose the hidden physical roots of the unique human capacity for passionate and creative work. He thinks of the hands as sensors which, **when personal desire prompts anyone to learn to do something well with the hands, an extremely complicated process is initiated that endows the work with a powerful emotional charge.** It is not until one touches the material, as the hand begins to understand it, **that one's life may be changed through knowing it is right.** Whether sculptor, musician, juggler or surgeon, concern for their hands is a by-product of the intense striving through which they turn them into the essential physical instruments for the realization of their own ideas and the communication of closely held feelings.

I believe this phenomenon of **materiality** emerged in a significant way by the selection of Swiss Architect **Peter Zumthor** as the recipient of the **Pritzker Prize** in Architecture a few years ago. Working away from the mainstream running a small architectural office in a wooden barn in the Swiss Alps, Zumthor does not fit into the mold of celebrity architect. Deeply informed by his early training as a cabinetmaker, he is a **materialist** in the way that he conceives of a building. Unlike an architect (for example) like **Peter Eisenman** who is interested in seeing what kind of architectural experience you will end up with if you **push an idea** as far as it can go, **Zumthor is**

doing the opposite. He starts by thinking about the physical, not the intellectual aspects of architecture and **pushes them as far into the realm of sensory** experience as they can go. Peter Zumthor looks toward materials in his work for the **“elemental knowledge”** which they contain. He does this in light of his belief that **“Postmodern life could be described as a state in which everything beyond our own personal biography seems vague, blurred and somehow unreal. He speaks of a “world full of signs and information which stand for things that no one fully understands because they too turn out to be mere signs for other things. The real thing remains hidden. No one ever gets to see it.”**

What gets my juices flowing is contemplating the mindset and creative impulse of those whose artistic search are **driven** by a **deep empathy** for materials. In understanding what motivates material artists, we need to first consider the way in which many of us in so called “technologically advanced” society now experience the physical world. **So much of our sensory experience comes through a large screen plasma T.V., the computer monitor or from gazing into the micro-screen of a multi-functional cell phone. Communication increasingly occurs digitally, rather than face to face and in the flesh. Our bodies are hermetically sealed by, glass encased, triple glazed, climate controlled and halogen lit apartments, houses, offices and automobiles. So many of the objects we live with are synthesized, reconstituted with their surfaces neoprene coated, plasticized, veneered and laminated creating materials which are so homogenized that they are ultimately un-recognizable.** Although the D.I.Y. (Do It Yourself) generation (in the USA) is beginning to change this, the ubiquitous wood shop and sewing room in the basements or in the spare room in the homes of past generations has been replaced by an entertainment centers containing all the **detritus of our digital age.** When the physical world is experienced indirectly, **removed second and third hand,** through the screen of a high resolution picture tube, it is not surprising that **the moment when we feel, smell and see the real stuff of which this earth is made,** the experience can be highly

emotional..... at times with huge attraction, repulsion, wonder, awe and even fear. Whether processed, synthetic, natural or raw; what materials mean and how they are perceived today, is a very rich and exciting area of discovery.

It is interesting to look back, not many decades ago, when writer Lucy Lippard was talking about the de-materialization of art, when Marcel Duchamp spurned the idea that there was value in making things by hand and when Arthur Danto predicted the **demise of the art object**. It was Danto's observation that the work of visual artists was becoming so dependent on words and theory for its existence, that in the end, all that would be left is theory. . **"Art having finally become vaporized in a dazzle of pure thought about itself, and remaining as it were solely as the object of its own consciousness."** None of this happened and in fact it appears that over the past decade all disciplines, whether painting, graphic design or photography, have been drawn to material based media as a relief from a preoccupation with words and language. Author Libby Lumpkin reinforced this tendency, in her essay "The Redemption of Practice" where she recognized that "artists (everywhere) are making things again" with works **"asserting their materiality."** Over a decade ago, she believed **there was a back lash to conceptual art being spawned by studio artists themselves through what they chose to make**. Lumpkin saw artists abandoning those theoreticians residing in the world of liberal arts who **discredited the power of objects** to directly communicate both emotionally and spiritually. Lumpkin says, "The nearly thirty year hegemony of art constructed solely as a liberal art – as an art of the mind – has come to an end. Not coincidentally, art critics, historians, and theorists have begun **fretting over a vague and ill-defined crisis in their discipline**. In fact, they are faced with what appears to be a daunting, full-scale redemption of the idea of art as practice." An exhibition at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles titled **"Thing"** has reinforced Lumpkin's earlier thoughts showing the work of emerging sculptors there who show a reinvestment in objects employing many material based techniques. Curator Christopher Miles now sees in the work of young L.A. artists as a **"partial move away from performative and environmental, architectural, installation approaches to sculpture, with a new emphasis on the hand made and custom and a decline in more conceptually based art practice."** Other high profile exhibitions with a focus on

sculpture have recently been proclaiming (johnny come lately) a return to materiality, to objects and to the handmade including the nearby Hirshhorn exhibition titled **The uncertainty of Objects and Ideas**. It was difficult for me to keep a straight face when I read the first paragraph of curator Anne Elegood's essay about the "**Counter-revolution**" happening in the studio practice of emerging sculptors. She wrote, 'The artists in this exhibition share a fundamental desire to create objects that exist in three-dimensional space, extending beyond the scope of opticality into the realm of the haptic and the subconscious. In our increasingly digital age, these artists give us something tangible rather than streams of data or images captured with light and mirror the world around us, presenting to their audiences freestanding objects we can imagine grabbing hold of, moving around, or backing up into. Their sculptures embody physical exertion and dirty hands; they are the evidence of actions ----- composing, building, constructing, stacking, bending, connecting and adorning. These artists believe in the reality of things.'

David Abraham is a writer and philosopher from the United States who has examined and eloquently written about the preliterate world as a way of gaining insight into the present. His thoughts and words are extremely relevant in a discussion about Materiality and the role instinct and the sub-conscious play in what we do. Artists who thrive in their creative work through an immense attraction and deep empathetic relationship with the physical do so through a need to infuse, through imaginative projection, our psyche into objects and materials. In his book **The Spell of the Sensuous** Abrahams reminds us that "**for thousands of generations human beings viewed themselves as part of the wider community of nature; that human beings lived not alongside, but existed within natural world and participated directly, not only with other people but with animals, plants and natural forms including mountains, rivers, winds and weather patterns. So called primitive people truly inhabited the earth and shared an, active relationship and feeling that the world was alive, and animate.**"⁷. Abraham draws on the work of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty who thinks of perception in terms of a **reciprocity**, that is, an ongoing interchange between our bodies and the entities that surround it. Abraham talks about a "**silent conversation that I carry on with things, a continuous dialogue that unfolds far below my verbal**

awareness--- and often, even, independent of my verbal awareness , as when my hand readily navigates the space between these scribed pages and the coffee cup across the table without my having to think about it, or when my legs, hiking, continually attune and adjust themselves to the varying steepness of the mountain slopes behind this house without my verbal consciousness needing to direct those adjustments. Whenever I quiet the persistent chatter of words within my head, I find this silent or wordless dance always already going on— **this improvised duet between my animal body and the fluid, breathing landscape that it inhabits.**” Basically what he is talking about is something that Craft and material artists have always understood in a deep and meaningful way; that is the way that materials we work with are animate and alive and are given life by the expectation placed on them by the maker.

To get a broader view of the way materiality is being thought about among young and emerging artists, I focused on this and other aspects of Craft in a research project with the American Craft Council not long ago. I interviewed over 25 distinguished artists, teachers and mentors from throughout the United States **who have a close working relationship with young and emerging artists.** I wanted to know the pulse and understand the mind set of emerging artists in all craft and material based media; what are they thinking, what do they care about , what is in the air. In a question about the use of materials among emerging artists we discovered (not a surprise to me) that there is greater interest now, than ever, in , in gravitating toward materials because of their **cultural value**, often over inherent working characteristics. This includes the use of non- precious, impure and visceral materials, with great attraction to ingredients which are psychologically volatile: Hair , skin, and anything that references the body, its fluids and various functions; often materials that attract and repulse simultaneously. We found great interest in the way **materials and material objects are perceived as they** reflect feelings about family, about domestic life and gender, about place, politics and historic events including modernism, scientific discovery and anything having to do with the human condition, especially its dark side. **Precious materials** like gold, silver or fur are attractive and will be used, not only because of their inherent beauty, but often to infuse work with a content expressing ideas (for example) about social status, threat to the ecology, animal rights etc. **Use of materials which are not durable, ephemeral** or short lived

are especially attractive to emerging artists, like food, waxes, latex, Styrofoam, and the stuff that finds itself in our landfills; recycled materials and all kinds of debris normally viewed as disposable are utilized for art making now, more than ever before. A faculty member from UC Davis in California said that it seems like many of our students, when examining the use of materials have turned into **cultural anthropologists**.

Let me show some slides and talk about a few artists whose work reflects something of what I have been talking about.

1. **Kristin Morgin** is a ceramic artist who received her MFA in ceramics from Alfred University in New York state and now teaches at California State University in Long Beach. Her use of ceramic material is very different from what we traditionally associate ceramic arts, often a rather refined perfection of kiln fired clay with over glazes. Kristen has taken her knowledge of clay and become an alchemist, **concocting** a new surface out of a mixture of clay, cement and glue. For Kristen, clay has become the skin applied over an armature of wood and wire making the object appear to be in a state of decomposition. For Kristen, Clay is dirt, it is the most fundamental of materials and she has allowed this primordial earth to permeate her psyche resulting in the creation of this rotting hulk (this one 15' long) crafted with great care (says Kristen) but appearing as if they were dredged up out of a lake somewhere. She has built a number of large scale corroding sculptures, often of vintage autos, musical instruments like grand pianos and more recently, fragmented animal figures. **This thing is identifiable as a 59 Cadillac, where this haunting yet elegant object appears to be a larger than life relic of some ancient civilization**, yet at the same time is recognizable as iconic American automobile emerging from modern times. These decomposing monster objects can be felt bodily when in their presence because of the way their physicality surrounds and quite literally, envelops the viewer. I enjoyed the reaction to her work which (I think) came out of an art blog where Morgin's car was seen as a **"work coming from an apocalyptic post carbon emissions world where the planet we destroyed in turn destroyed our fossil fuel burners."** Kirsten talks about them being built to be shown at a few venues, later dismantled, reusing whatever can be salvaged. They are like stage props, good for the short term theatre and then they simply go away.

(Sweet and Low Down) (Cello #2)

3. **Nick Cave** was the youngest of six boys, raised in the late 1960's by a single mother in rural Missouri. He credits his mother with 'kickstarting' his career by her enthusiasm in encouraging her son's interest in making all kinds of art works, hand made cards, and by modifying hand me down clothing he inherited from 6 older brothers. Money was often short in household which required him to make things out of materials found around the house or in local thrift shops and picked up at garage sales. Nick went to the Kansas City Art Institute where he studied textiles and Fibers and then to Cranbrook Academy of Art for his graduate degree. While in Kansas City, Nick also became interested in Dance through an Alvin Ailey program which was established there. Although he was not interested in devoting himself to Dance exclusively, he began to consider the possibility of making dance movement a part of his art. Shortly after landing a teaching job at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1992 Nick made his first **Sound Suit**, similar to what you see here, out of twigs which he found discarded while visiting Chicago's Grant Park. It was at a time when he was feeling especially vulnerable, right after the **racially motivated beating of Rodney King** by members of the Los Angeles police department. That incident, said Nick, is when **"I started to think of myself more and more as a black man-- as someone discarded, devalued, viewed as less than."** This is when he talks about disguising and camouflaging his psyche inside a garment whose cover is saturated with rich layers of loosely attached debris, sticks, feathers, bottle caps, used pencils and twigs. For Nick, the materiality of the sound suits became an **identity altering second skin**, hiding beneath where the outside world cannot identify gender or color of the person wearing. Cave began to perform these works where the movement of his body activates materials creating sound and transforms the materials into a myriad of images. The materials used by Cave are disposable, cast off and in a way, says Cave, **they are a metaphor for a society that perceives black men as dispensable and of little intrinsic value.** Hundreds of Sound suits have been made in the last 15 years with some exhibited as sculpture in galleries and others choreographed as stage performances. In recent years it appears that Nick is much more celebratory and optimistic showing much more extravagant ornamentation using

colorful deconstructed sweaters, socks, beads along with dyed synthetic and human hair. Of course the suits are best seen and heard when in motion and not static on the screen.

3. On the subject of **apparel consumption**, this year in the United States, every person (man, woman, child) acquired an average of 62 garments and..... between the years 2010 and 2015 the increase in consumption is projected to be at **75%**. That makes for one hell of a pile of clothing to be recycled. Textiles are becoming the next material for **sidewalk recycling** after glass, paper, plastic and tin.

Here is a 5 story cloth mountain of discarded clothing, 30 tons of it; the material basis of Christian Boltanski monumental installation titled “No Man’s Land” a couple years ago at the Park Avenue Armory in New York City. In this immersive landscape a 60 foot crane continuously picks up clumps of clothing and deposits it For Boltanski each piece of clothing is symbolic, tells a story and for him has profoundly represented the human condition. It reiterates themes familiar to Boltanski’s work including memory, individuality, anonymity, life, death. The crane is used to lift up clumps of garments and then drop them randomly on the pile. Christian, speaks of the element of chance that each one of us has in the world with his reference to the symbolic use of **industrial management of human life**. The neatly catalogued biscuit tins reinforce this feeling of anonymity. There are also many plots of clothing surrounding the pile along with recordings of hundreds of individual heart beats softly playing throughout the armory reinforcing the connection to each unique life associated with each garment. 4. The use of discarded clothing has been especially important to Boltanski because of the association with clothing depots he experienced that were left behind at Nazi concentration camps in Germany when he was a young child.

4. This **glut of discarded clothing** has also been the source of materiality and meaning for a pair of Cuban born American artists living Miami’s little Haiti. **Alan Guerra and Neraldo de la Paz** have been collaborating since 1996 using their **composite name Guerra De La Paz**. This work may owe some **debt of gratitude to the work of Christian Boltanski**, however it is coming from an other generation and a certain level of humor and differing content. Early on they were both overwhelmed and appalled when hearing of as well as seeing the excessive amount of clothing, worn, new, un-

marketable; some 2.5 billion pounds **ending up in charity** and then 80% of that shipped globally. The partners view their work as a kind of textile archaeology with a history examining various levels of cultural debris. This work titled **Nine** is a great mound of clothing running the gamut of prom dresses, Christmas jumpers and embarrassing fads from another year which contain (they describe as) the **weight of dis-owned memories**. This is not clothing worn out but rather that which is out of fashion or no longer in favor. Beneath the fringes are nine people who have the proverbial strength bearing that load and acting as a testament to the value of community.

In one of their **Mounds** called **Tribute**, Guerra De La Paz have painstakingly selected color chosen to achieve a painterly affect..... the rainbow range of color comes not through dye but by sorting. As with much of their work this has a strong social-political edge, however the partners are openly willing to be playful and free with their use of discarded clothing giving it not only a second life but to create the affect of a tropical paradise Guerra De La Paz are interested in having their work accessible to everyone and are doing so by using materials which resonate on many levels with all of us. Shown here are other related works with a message concerning mass consumption, war and politics. There is also a playful look at unwanted excess including making this male torso made of deconstructed garments and shoulder pads.

5. **Sang Wook Lee** is a Korean-born fiber artist who draws upon his **personal biography as a source of meaning** in the evolution of new sculptural work. He has chosen food as a visual and tactile reference in the construction of (often) monumental curved walls and other related architectural forms. He uses thousands of bricks of **ramen noodles** (for which he negotiates a donation from the manufacturer) so that their squirming chaos is seen as frozen texture within each rigid block. Some pieces have been made with a faux version of the blocks using cotton yarn, glue and saw dust. It is important to understand that Sang Wook is drawn to ramen not only for its aesthetic qualities as a material, but also because of the way it relates to his early life experiences and the strong cultural overtones of this ubiquitous and inexpensive foodstuff. There is often humor associated with ramen noodles, a basic food staple for generations of American college students surviving on limited budgets. However, the dried noodle has other implications; Lee understands of its low

cost way of warding off hunger for working class people in both Japan and Korea after the Second World War and, later, after the Korean Conflict. Sang Wook grew up with ramen noodles at his dinner table in Korea, but they have acquired a whole other level of meaning since his immigration to the United States to study for an MFA in Fiber at the University of Georgia. **Interested in cross cultural experiences he uses ramen to construct what he considers uniquely American-built structures, including farm silo and Native American architectural ruins of the Southwest.** Although his earlier art-school experience in Korea was based on traditional tapestry making and printed textiles, Lee now allows his impulse to work with ephemeral materials and labor intensive processes to evolve into something completely different. Also, even though his work has an overwhelming physical presence, it is now in a very different place in terms of its limited life span and marketability.

6. A graduate from the Masters program in Jewelry and Metals at the Royal College of Art in London, **Claudia Crisan** first traveled abroad from her native Rumania in 2002 to study with us at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. She represents a new breed in the field Craft based media and material studies where rather than remaining loyal to a single media or material, her interests lie in a true hybrid mix. **At first Claudia worked in Textiles & Fiber and then moved to metals and jewelry, while all along constructing costume, creating performances and developing installation work. She continued these strategies in graduate school but added work with three dimensional computer printing and experimented with a variety of ephemeral materials.** Claudia's work is extremely subjective, coming out of a powerful emotional sensibility; usually it relates to a personal experience taking place around the time the work is being made. With Chrisan, the body is almost always the site of her rumination with material and process being a catalyst in the generation of ideas. **Autumn in London**, a crochet head covering, was the first thing she made at RCA. She refers to it as **"the metaphor creating a spiritual shelter, a hiding place where I could observe, and not really be seen, driven by the novelty of all that was happening in my new life."** **Fire Veil**, made at the end of her time at RCA, is similar to the first piece, but now creates a veil of separation. She says this also refers to the social element of the Muslim veil, a symbol which entraps the woman figure, grounding it to the heaviness of earth and society. **Ligetty's Autumn in Warsaw** is a crocheted piece in the shape and actual size of an ear.

Made with finely knotted sewing thread, it reads almost as a coating. Claudia calls it **a metaphor for a way of filtering the sound of thoughts and ideas infusing us from the outside world.** In “**Romance**”, wax petals were applied and grew into a shape surrounding, hugging, and sheltering the body; this was a performance piece created around the time of her own wedding. **Taste Me** is a neckpiece made of **spun sugar** which was exhibited at the Royal College of Art and available for consumption by the audience throughout the night. Other spun sugar work melted down in the gallery over the duration of the exhibition emphasizing the value of this work as an experience over the short term, then lost. In her statement for the show at RCA Crisan said “**This work has something of the ridiculous gallop of life, the need of constant novelty which dehumanizes, dissipating us in the vanity of the present.**” Here is a work called **Blush** which was part of a project launched by the Costume Society of the RCA celebrating their Ruby Anniversary and shown at the Victoria and Albert Museum. I show this because it reveals another side of Claudia. She is able to work within the realm of fashion design and also is an extremely competent metal smith winning the **Great Britain Young Jewelry Designer of the Year** award.

7. Jonathan Brilliant is a young artist based in South Carolina who doesn't seem to have any particular grand philosophical idea underpinning his work. He is a University trained artist, an admitted obsessive compulsive who says, “My work is situated around the visual phenomena of patterning and mark-making fused with the use of pre and post-consumer manufactured materials.” He says he relates to the British approach to installation, like the work of Andy Goldsworthy, but rather than working from whatever **natural materials** are immediately at hand, Jonathan grabs what ever **manufactured materials** he can find in quantity. For him the modern landscape is the local coffee shop with paper coffee cups, plastic lids and the use of many **hundreds of thousands of wooden coffee stirrers.** He loves the idea of being an itinerant artist traveling throughout the United States and abroad building these volumetric ephemeral structures in what ever place will have him including recent work in Berlin and London. No adhesive or fastener is used in construction with the lacey and diaphanous walls of these forms are held together only by friction created during the process of inter-weaving and overlapping the flat sticks together.

8. The work of African sculptor and textile artist **El Anatsui** has been overwhelming the material and haptic sensibilities of many who have seen his work throughout the world over the past few years. **El Anatsui** is an artist working in Nigeria and born in Ghana, home of a vibrant and rich textile culture. His work shows us much about the symbolic and signifying potential of cloth. Although his work reflects the history and spirit of traditional Kente cloth of the Ashanti people of Ghana, it also has other important references. El Anatsui is a sculptor and textile artist who draws on the social and cultural history of his country through an intensive re-use of materials like **discarded metal debris including liquor bottle caps, evaporated milk tins, aluminum wrappings from the tops of bottles, rusty metal graters and old printing plates gathered around his home town in Nigeria where the artist has lived and worked for the last 28 years.** For Anatsui, meaning is embedded in materials on many levels, not only providing critical commentary on some of the social ills including alcoholism and liquor's connection to **slavery economics**, and also on the adverse **affects of consumerism** and waste which have plagued his country for generations..... However his sense of materiality also expresses transcendence. The **originality, striking beauty and elegance of these architectural quilts, derived from scrap, is profoundly symbolic as a source of renewal.** Bottle caps are squared off and stitched with fine copper wire to become jewel like elements which, when repeated a thousand times over, become a rich and luxurious pattern field. **(20'x30' at the Pallazo Fortuny in Venice during Venice Biennale)** Anatsui explains that "Cloth is to the African what monuments are to Westerners. His sculptures emerge and grow as a **metaphorical** textile out of African material culture and ultimately are monuments in themselves celebrating a new beginning. **(Dusasa II) (Bleeding Takari)** Susan Vogel from Columbia University spoke of the **powerful material presence and scale of this work at the 2007 Venice Biennale which gave it a sense of beauty, different from anything else and the only work seen that was not pessimistic. She said,"you trudge past images of ruination, and you arrive at uplift, at resolution."**

9. I am continually amazed by the way a single thread can morph into volumes and be the source of an expression **evoking a highly emotional charge.** In weaving, threads may be stretched in a single plane bearing figurative or abstract imagery imbedded into the surface of cloth. **Chiharu Shioto** weaves black yarns into a hectic

array that takes over entire galleries in which highly personal objects are found **cocooned**. Here this Berlin based Japanese artist ensnares a grand piano around in skeins of the unconscious. When Shio to was nine years old her neighbor's house burned down; the following day the artist saw a charred piano amongst the ruins. This instrument that lost its sound has haunted the artist and inspired various works she sets alight to a grand piano, then displays the remains within an installation of black thread. The work is titled *Sounds of Silence*. Last year I photographed some of her work at a New York gallery where a dark cloud of threads filters, obscures yet at the same time swallows you as you enter the space. The dark threads (as one reviewer wrote) "simultaneously impart a fear of death and the vigor of life through ordinary objects. Whether an empty suitcase or child's dress, there feels like a memory is attached to each clouded object whose passage is fading into oblivion."

This work is titled **Breath of the Spirit**. Shio ta spent a year and a half collecting old, worn out **shoes** from young and old throughout Japan. Requests were sent out through the internet, newspapers, hand bills, radio broadcasts for **shoes and short stories about them**. **She received 2000 pairs from throughout the country** which she laid out in an exhibition space and then **joined** them together, each with a red string. The threads then merged, connecting all of those lives and their stories. Again, this is typical of the way Shio ta uses mundane objects; including stained dresses, old suitcases, window frames to conjure up the spirit of memories which each contain.

8. Maurizio Anzeri: Another artist who takes yarn, that is common sewing thread, and sews directly onto vintage photographs, garnishing the portraits, creating an often haunting, psychological aura. These incredible interventions using ordinary embroidery techniques, pierces and penetrates the photograph with a needle and releases something of the psyches of the subject of each photograph. Anzeri's work has been referred to as photo-sculpture, I think, because of the way the embroidered image becomes a profoundly physical mask that seems to have grown on and out of the person, hiding and revealing what is underneath, revealing what is inside the brains of each character. Some feel like brains are literally pouring out. On occasion, Anzeri collaborates with a contemporary photographer **Richard Burbridge**.

9. The materiality of **Orley Genger** is not hesitant or subtle. I photographed this installation at MassMoca a few years ago during the exhibition titled **Material World** and must say that as I walked through her work I have rarely ever experienced sculpture where you feel, in your body, the **sheer physicality** and volume of this sculptural mass. This knitted and painted piece titled **Big Boss** pulsates and assaults you with its **red-ness** as it flows across the old mill floors of the galleries there in Western Massachusetts. Someone referred to this work as a **tsunami of tangled webs**. Also important to the work is the use of recycled rope, discarded by Maine fishermen when by law, they were recently required to replace all rope used for fishing that did not sink to the ocean floor. This ruling was an attempt to help prevent whales and other large sea creatures from becoming entangled. Conceptually I believe what is most important about Genger's work is the way that the **process of making becomes part of content**. That is, the way meaning comes through the way energy utilized in the repetitious act of looping and crocheting the rope by hand is **captured as visual energy** within the surface and is experienced viscerally by the viewer. **We see in this work a phenomenon which inherent in the constructing all textiles, whether large or small in scale, where intersecting threads, yarns or rope create an often granular and sedimentary build-up, of incessant layering where the surface appears cellular and comes "alive."**

Here is work installed at the Indianapolis Museum of Art – 2009 where **colossal** piles of monochrome black crocheted planes of nylon climbing rope are piled many layers high into cubes and columns. Here Genger pokes fun the hard and often brutal minimalist art of the 60's, with her relaxed and pliable planes of handmade crocheted rope.

Her largest and most ambitious work to date is an installation which may be seen now and through the **Summer at Madison Square Park in Manhattan**. As luck had it, I was coming through New York a few weeks ago and was able to photograph the work made (as with much of her work) repurposed rope acquired from the **Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation.....1.4 million feet of it** I believe this installation titled **Red Yellow Blue** seems much less confrontational; rather more playful than earlier work and at times it appears to caterpillar through out the park. Orly hoped that this work would

create a feeling of safety and containment away from the neuroses and craziness of the surrounding city by building these soft, sedimentary walls made of textile material. Also, it's rare that the viewing public has permission to touch or sit on any sculpture.

10. The word **extreme** is what **Dave Cole** calls the knitting he has been doing over the past 10 years since his graduation from Brown University. He learned knitting one Summer from a teacher who taught **Hyperactive** kids to knit..... being hyperactive himself, he never thought he would have the patience to learn himself. But he did learn and it became a way to pay attention and focus during lectures at Brown. It also became a whole way of working and thinking. **In Fiberglass Teddy Bear (shown here) Cole is undermining the stereotype of the ubiquitous cuddly play toy by knitting the teddy bear to a nightmarish scale using caustic materials, in this case fiberglass insulation.** He does a similar thing with **Lead Teddy**, creating another horrific Teddy, only this time knitting the toy in real scale with his **hand sliced poisonous lead ribbon**. Cole says, **"A basic element of my work is that I am subverting the feminine process. But more than that I'm subverting the masculine material. Often the piece gets read the other way around, but that's not my intention. It's more like I'm co-opting the domestic process to say something about masculinity."** **Dave Cole** loves to build monuments and play with big industrially scaled machines including this one he devised at MassMOCA. In just another approach to Cole's notion of extreme knitting, he uses **2 heavy excavators** fitted with specially designed knitting needles to knit an **American Flag**. It may be a public spectacle and a form of great entertainment, but also triggers both celebratory and critical readings of American patriotism. Thought that with Dave Cole I would end this talk in a big way.....