



MATERIAL
MATTERS

Eduardo Abaroa | Tónico Lemos Auad | Jean Blackburn | Lucky DeBellevue

Tara Donovan | Tony Feher | Ceal Floyer | Tom Friedman

Felix Gonzalez-Torres | Tim Hawkinson | Gabriel Kuri | Christian Marclay

Vik Muniz | Matthew Northridge | Jean Shin | Dan Steinhilber

Jessica Stockholder | Yuken Teruya | Cheyney Thompson | Shirley Tse



M A T E R I A L

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Curated by Andrea Inselmann

INTRODUCTION

Material Matters focuses on the work of twenty artists from the United States, Mexico, Brazil, Japan, and Pakistan who share certain working practices and sensibilities. Linked by an engagement with everyday materials and objects, the artists included in the exhibition not only reflect on contemporary life but also pay homage to the traditions of art. Their work draws upon the language of American Minimal and Conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s and the aesthetics of the Italian counterpart, Arte Povera, which explored the relationship between art and life by advocating complete openness toward materials and processes. A similar questioning of assumptions about what the art-making process entailed had already taken place more than fifty years earlier, when, in 1913, Marcel Duchamp introduced his first Readymade by fixing an ordinary bicycle wheel to a stool. Since then, the meaning of art has become more complex. Related to experience, it is no longer purely reliant on the visual, but rather an exploration of what everyone sees and consumes.

Accordingly, the artists in *Material Matters* look for inspiration in the everyday world of the urban environment, their materials coming from diverse sources but rarely, if at all, from the traditional art store. By trans-

forming mundane materials, these artists explore the line that separates reality from fiction. Taking everyday materials and changing them into new narratives or forms, they suggest the playfulness of things and find the marvelous in the mundane. While many of the featured artists have emerged only in recent years, some – including Tony Feher, Tom Friedman, Tim Hawkinson, and Jessica Stockholder – have been working predominantly with everyday materials since the late 1980s, influencing a whole generation of younger artists; a necessarily limited selection of them is brought together in *Material Matters*, which is intended to address several, often overlapping, themes. . . . One of the main topics revolves around the dissolution of traditional categories in art, such as painting and sculpture, sculpture and architecture, representation and abstraction. Jean Shin's room-size installation, for instance, engages the language of architecture while presenting an abstracted image of the Cornell student body. Dan Steinhilber's untitled balloon piece not only questions the boundaries between painting and sculpture but also introduces elements of performance and process in his piece. The carpet installation also produced on site by Tonico Lemos Auad illustrates the relationship between

drawing and architecture as it bears witness to the act of making, so central throughout *Material Matters*.

Another major theme of the exhibition involves artists who begin with the ephemera of everyday life, like pipe cleaners, plastic bottles, drinking straws, and polystyrene, and by sheer accumulation achieve an aesthetic transformation. For instance, Lucky DeBellevue's ephemeral, drawing-like sculpture is made of hundreds of pipe cleaners, in which repetition and accumulation are major elements. Knotting and lacing the chenille stems, the artist builds his sculptures in a labor-intensive process. This is a process also familiar to Tara Donovan, whose untitled pin cube involves the assembly of hundreds of thousands of straight pins. Shirley Tse transforms polystyrene packing materials into simulated futuristic cityscapes, making use of materials that usually are discarded. While issues of sustainability and recycling run through much of the work included in *Material Matters*, they are epitomized in Yuken Teruya's delicate sculptures made from disposable fast-food bags. Tony Feher is another artist who demonstrates his ability to turn nothing into something, using materials that the rest of us throw into the trash. Yet another important aspect of the work included here is the air of

spontaneity that the artists bring to their chosen materials and objects. Ceal Floyer is known for using ready-made or altered everyday objects in her work. Her series *Helix* consists of metric circle templates filled with circular objects found in her purse, creating an ever so fleeting self-portrait, consistent with our impermanent times. Gabriel Kuri explores common situations and everyday materials that are recontextualized in his work. He has used the ubiquitous plastic shopping bag in a number of kinetic sculptures. Attached to oscillating wall fans, the billowing bags function as humorous, or melancholy reminders of our wasteful existence.

Material Matters illustrates just one tendency in the ever widening field of contemporary art. Drawing from a variety of art historical precedents as well as popular culture, the exhibition presents international contemporary artistic practices through the work of established and emerging artists who challenge our preconceptions of what constitutes art. In doing so, they overthrow the hierarchy between high and low culture, questioning art as being entirely distinct from the everyday world.

A. I.

J E A N S H I N

Jean Shin has used such cast-off materials as broken umbrellas, single socks, lottery tickets, and worn shoe soles to create installations that are visually stunning and conceptually meaningful. Here, the artist enlisted Cornell University students to donate clothes to create an imaginary community of sorts, in which boundaries between private and public, student body and museum, blur. Looking at the mural that sweeps across three walls in abstract shapes morphing from darks to pastels, it is not surprising that Shin's background is in painting. To make the mosaic-like piece, Shin cut out the seams, cuffs, and pockets from the donated clothes. She then starched and ironed the cut outs and affixed them with starch to the walls of the gallery. A net of seams, cuffs, plackets, and pockets hangs from the ceiling. Balanced on the boundary between representation and abstraction, formal concerns and cultural investigation, Shin's installation shares ideas with other works in *Material Matters* that locate meaning somewhere between the object and the idea, the mundane and the marvelous, while exploding traditional definitions of such categories as painting and sculpture.

Student Body (Cornell University), details,
2005





Cornell University
Herbert F. Johnson
Museum of Art

