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Material Matters

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Material Matters

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Mary Bittner Wiseman

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In *Vers une Architecture* (1923), Le Corbusier said:

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"...cubes, cones, spheres, cylinders or pyramids are the great primary forms which light reveals to advantage; the images of these is distinct and tangible within us and without ambiguity. It is for this reason that these are *beautiful forms, the most beautiful forms*. Everybody is agreed to that, the child, the savage, and the metaphysician."(p. 31) He was heralding the end of custom, tradition, and styles in architecture in the name of the great primary forms that he said compose the world and had now come to the fore in industrial production that is part of the new: "A new epoch has begun. There exists a new spirit." (p. 9) This is an uncanny forerunner of what is happening in the art world today as the hegemony of styles gives way in the wake of high modernism's leaving the stage, allowing individual works of art to stand on their own and make the case that they merit the name "art." An example of an art that speaks to the child, the savage, and the metaphysician, significant because of the attention it garners on the world stage, is the post-1989 art being made by Chinese artists. The work's *materials* and the *stories* that attend them are "distinct and tangible within us and without ambiguity." They speak to everyone, the materials appealing to the senses and the stories to the imagination.

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Sometimes it is the *identity* of the material that matters, like the dust from 9/11 in Xu Bing's *Where Does the Dust Itself Collect?* (2003), shards from Tibetan statues of Buddha destroyed during the Cultural Revolution made into sculptures of Buddha parts by Zhang Huan, or rebars from schools destroyed in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake fashioned into a work of minimal art by Ai Weiwei, *Steel Rebar* (2008-2012). Other times the material

matters because of its *source*, like windows and doors from destroyed late dynasty temples used by Ai Weiwei, temple ash in paintings Zhang Huan, or explosions of gunpowder or the ash they leave from which Cai Guo-Qiang makes art. What can matter is *what happened* at a place about which art is made, like the dam in the Yangtze River, memorialized in an exhibit at the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, *Displacement: The Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art* (2008). Again, sometimes it is the *kind* of thing the material is, rather than a specific member of the kind, for example, the 1001 Chinese citizens that Ai Weiwei took to the 2007 *Documenta* as the constituents of the artwork *Fairy Tale* (2008) and as observers of the other works in the exhibition and the bags of rice in Wang Guangyi's *Things-in-Themselves* (2012). Further examples are the insects and the creatures that feed on them in Huang Yong Ping's *Theater of the World* (2012), and the earth worms and silk worms, the life they generated and the silk they spun in *The New York Earthworm Series* (1998) and *Silkworms Series* (1998) by, respectively, Cai Guo-Qiang and Xu Bing.

Note that the materials in this new art are immediate, particular, and concrete. How are they like Le Corbusier's cubes, cones, spheres, cylinders or pyramids? They too are least common denominators. The masses whose forms Le Corbusier celebrates are made of something. It is some material or other that has form, and we can see materialism as another side of formalism. The stories that accompany artworks' materials are as much a part of the work as their materials are. Fully to grasp works in which the material holds sway is to know its story, for example, that the dust is from 9/11, that the household items are from the home of the mother of the artist, Song Dong, that rice is a food without which the Chinese would not have survived, and that the Americans took tobacco to China as the British had taken opium. This last is from Xu Bing's three exhibitions mounted in different cities in different years, *Tobacco Project; Duke/ Shanghai/ Virginia* (1999-2011), a project that expanded the criterion of "exhibition." One needs to know the story being told in *Annunciation* paintings to know that it is not just an angel addressing a woman, but in those paintings the *image* carries the story, whereas in the Chinese works it is the *material*. That is why material matters. There is an exhibition at the Smart Museum of Art of the University of Chicago (2019-2020) curated by Wu Hung that underscores the claims made here. It is *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*.

(Note: To see the image of each work, go online, type the work's title and then the artist's name. For exhibitions, type in the

curator's name and the exhibition's title.)

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A retired professor of philosophy from Brooklyn College and The Graduate Center of The City University of New York, she is the co-editor with Liu Yuedi of *Strategic Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Art* (Brill, 2011) and the author of the *A Grand Materialism in the New Art from China* (Lexington Books, forthcoming).

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