

Introduction : A Rhythmanalysis of Art

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This text is the introduction to G. Minissale, [Rhythm in Art, Psychology and New Materialism](#), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, 300 p. The original Pdf was downloaded from the [Academia](#) website where it is freely available. I thank Greg Minissale for the permission to republish it here.

We overlook the hairline fractures in the sheen of an oil painting in order to exchange glances with a long-deceased personage. Inconvenient truths are barely registered : a ridge of impasto collects dust, an uncertain light on the surface moves as we move, briefly exposing the warp and weft of the canvas. To focus on humble materials would only remind us that the silk, hair and flesh, the mind and soul depicted, are bits of stuff slowly decaying. Several centuries of practice have turned this habit of overlooking matter into a fine art : the image prevails over its worthless material substrate.



Why do we overlook matter in this way and what happens when we don't ? This is one of the key questions I pursue in this book. An answer to the first part of this question is that for many centuries it seemed a natural function of art to express eternal ideals – the divine, the soul, the mind, order and harmony, and other immutable truths. Making art has long been an exercise, implicit or explicit, in manipulating inanimate matter and controlling the chaos and contingency that undermine these ideals. Yet artists literally hold matter in their hands, replaying these kinds of conflicts at the back of their minds. In contrast, and to answer the second part of the question, in modern abstract art, wild and rude amounts of matter seem to be all there is to look at. Without order, matter comes forth to produce a direct encounter with its rhythms, textures and viscosities, offering no narrative, meaning or form in which to find comfort.

This book studies the kind of engagement that is involved in sifting through the matter in abstract art, an experience that rhythmically switches from order to disorder and back again. In many of the artworks I examine, matter appears unmodelled and in a raw state. Such work offers the tantalising notion that, however much it presents visions of rhythmic strata, dappled shadows and swarming masses, abstract art is simply pigment, oil, sand and dust – a zone, or more particularly a piece of material, left dangling, free of artistic manipulation. When the artist relaxes control of matter, and the viewer follows this relinquishment of control, there may arise a feeling of passive receptivity to the agitated patterns of matter in the work that seem to gather and disperse of their own accord. How this kind of spontaneous, involuntary and rhythmic connection arises is the stuff of this book. Involuntary yet structured rhythms in the artist's brain and body arise in the handling of materials in this kind of artistic practice. These internal rhythms are at the same time externalised in abstract art and may be felt as rhythm by the viewer. Rhythm is an essential way in which the brain and body are connected to the world, and this is particularly so in the world of abstract art. The kind of artistic practice that enables these connections resists centuries of philosophical and aesthetic order that

has elevated the substance of mind over the substance of matter. But, as I will argue here, such art effectively, and through contact with matter, in fact eliminates this 'substance dualism'.

To understand how the rhythmic entanglement of brain, body and world emerges we must rely on different levels of description : philosophical, psychological and artistic. For a good example of how artists themselves have intuitively attempted to do this, we can look to the Catalan artist Antoni Tàpies who describes his painting as

organic elements, forms that suggest natural rhythms and the spontaneous movement of matter ; a sense of landscape, the suggestion of the primordial unity of all things ; generalized matter ; affirmation of and esteem for the things of the earth meditation on a cosmic theme, reflections for contemplation of the earth, of the magma, of lava, of ash [In] Buddhist meditation, they also seek the support of certain *kasinas* that sometimes consist of earth placed in a frame, in a hole in a wall, in charred matter (Tàpies in Ishaghpour 2006, 117).

Along with post-war European and American abstract art, I focus on examples of 'matter painting', which Laurence Alloway describes as 'a form halfway between painting and sculpture' (Alloway 1960, n.p.). I examine the underlying dynamics of thoughts and feelings involved in viewing this kind of art in the hope of digging deeper into what we mean by 'abstraction'. Art historian David Sylvester suggests that matter painting symbolises the 'massive materiality of the physical world, the relationship between man and the raw materials with which he builds, the inchoate matter which is at once responsive and resistant to his will to impose a form upon it' (Sylvester 1997, 171). But rather than being merely a vehicle for the act of painting, 'the thick opaque matter of these paintings seems not only to have a life but to have lived, to have been weathered and ravaged by time' (171). And for the philosopher Martin Heidegger in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, art 'does not cause the material to disappear, but rather causes it to come forth for the very first time' (Heidegger 2002, 46). [...]