Dismantling dichotomies: Alan Alborough's material conceptualism

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ABSTRACT

Alan Alborough uses industrial materials like cable ties, plastic bottles, clothes pegs and fishing gut to create intricate installations that explore art-making processes and challenge the conventions of display and spectatorship in the field of exhibition. As a result, Alborough is regarded as a leading contemporary South African conceptual artist. Despite Alborough's deliberate use of specific materials and the close attention he pays to the construction of his installations, much of the writing on Alborough fails to explore the apparent disjuncture between the material and conceptual in his work.

In this article, I investigate the relationship between the material and the conceptual in Alborough's works. I argue that his preoccupation with materiality challenges the construction of conceptual art as a dematerialised art. I begin with a discussion of one of Alborough's artworks that characterises his interest in the conceptual and material. I then consider some reasons why the materiality of Alborough's works is overlooked. This is followed by a brief discussion of some challenges materiality poses for conceptual art. I recommend social anthropological theories of materiality which, when applied to Alborough's works, are useful in revealing the ways in which this artist challenges the dichotomy of materiality and concept commonly associated with conceptual art.

Keywords: Alan Alborough; conceptual art; dematerialisation; materiality; found objects, installation.

Introduction

Alan Alborough's use of banal found objects to create installations that interrogate the contexts of exhibition and spectatorship locate his work within contemporary global art practices that are indebted to conceptual art. Since its emergence as an art movement in America in the mid-1960s, conceptual art has been associated with the privileging of the concept rather than the formal qualities of the art object. According to Alexander Alberro (1999:xvii), conceptual artists share 'a growing wariness toward definitions of artistic practice as purely visual'. They explore the contexts of display and distribution of artworks, and have a strong interest in reflexivity and language (Alberro 1999:xvii). Conceptual art often took the form of pieces of paper, or instructions for site specific constructions which could be easily transported, and could be made by anyone following the instructions, as was the case with Sol LeWitt's (1972) diagrams and instructions for his *Wall Drawing no.146* (see Martha Buskirk 2005:51). Such works attempted to undermine the need for galleries and dealers in the production and distribution of art, and questioned the audience's role in making meaning when engaging with artworks. Lucy Lippard (1997) coined the term the 'dematerialisation of the art object' to describe the 1960's American conceptual artists' strategy of art making. Lippard (1997:7) argues that the apparent 'dematerialisation' of the art object by the historical conceptual artists was a result of their political agenda to critique the institutions of art that controlled the conditions of exhibiting and viewing artworks. Corroborating this view, Stephen Bann (1999:2) points out that through creating ephemeral, impermanent artworks that challenged the materiality of modernism, conceptual artists of America in the 1960s were able to mount a political critique of the commodification of art.

Contemporary artists who make use of found objects, temporary installations, have a strong interest in self-reflexivity and language, and who seek to challenge the institutions of art are indebted to conceptual art. Buskirk (2005:14) argues that contemporary artists who reference artistic precedents established by artists who came before them often brought together multiple sources and distinct approaches. Far from mere mimicry, each reiteration can be thought of as a new inflection that cannot be understood in the same way as its predecessor, not least because later iterations are performed with knowledge of, and often in dialogue with, the former practices. Thus, rather than describing the contemporary artists' work in the same terms as their predecessors, it is useful to explore what Colin Richards (2002:38) describes as a 'conceptual impulse' within certain contemporary art making practices that demonstrate the tendencies of the conceptual art of the 1960s.

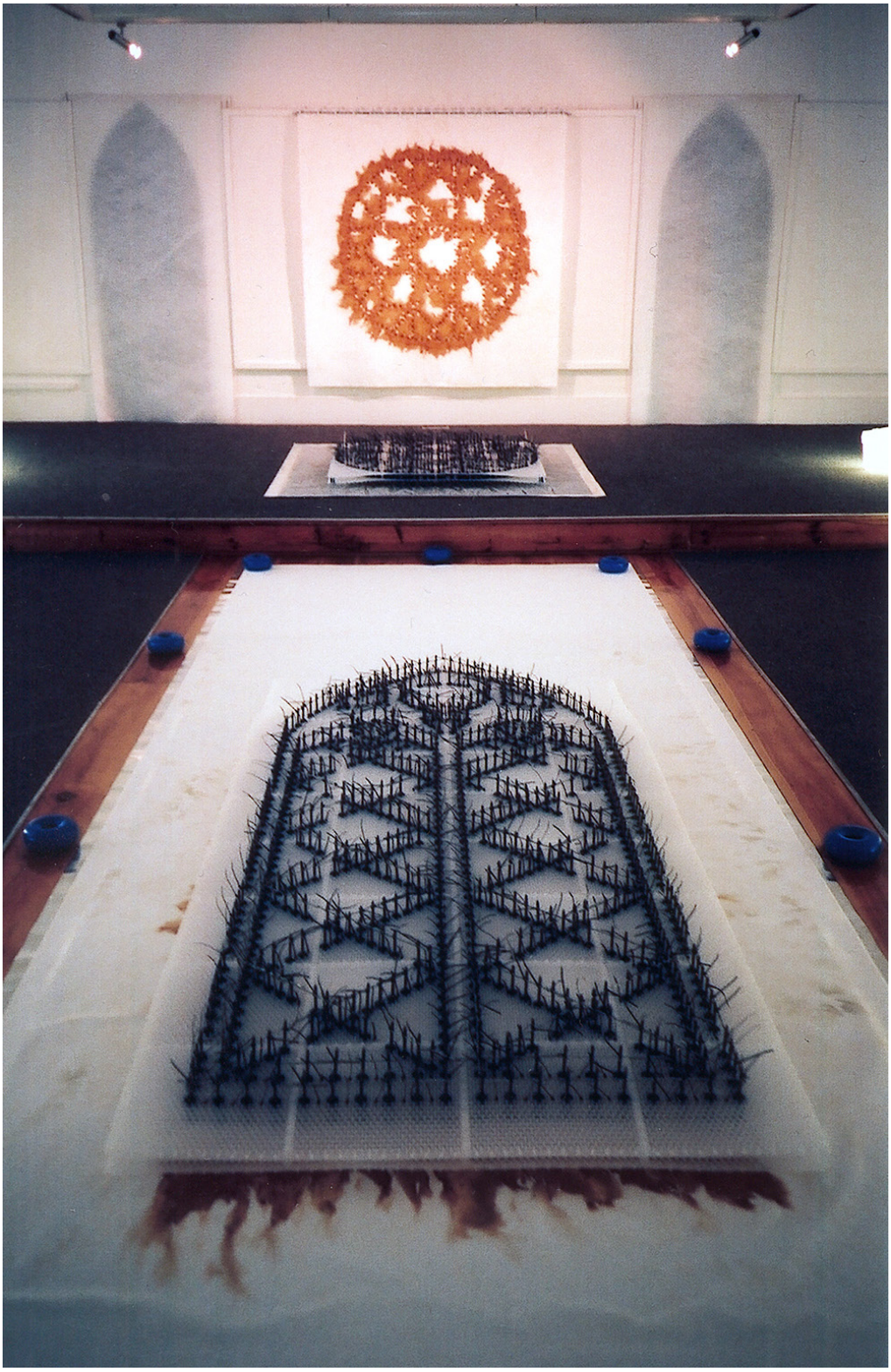

FIGURE **Nº 1**

Alan Alborough, Untitled installation at the University of Stellenbosch Gallery, 2000. Installation view showing the relationship between the sculptures and the architectural features of the gallery. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

A conceptual impulse in Alborough's works has been recognised by a number of art theorists, such as Paul Edmunds (2000), Sandra Klopper (2002), and Colin Richards (2002, 2004). Despite Alborough's deliberate use of specific materials when creating installations, much of the writing about his art works merely mentions the materials he uses without exploring the possible links between the materiality and conceptualism in the work. In this article, I explore the relationship between the material and the conceptual in Alborough's works, in order to reveal the ways in which his preoccupation with materiality challenges the dichotomy between the material and the conceptual implied in Lippard's (1997) construction of conceptual art as a dematerialised art. I begin with a discussion of one of Alborough's artworks that characterises his interest in the conceptual and material. Then I explore some responses to Alborough's artworks, and consider possible reasons why art critics tend to ignore the material qualities of his artworks. I suggest that adopting a social anthropological approach to understanding materiality is helpful for understanding the link between the material and conceptual in Alborough's work. Using a social anthropological lens, I analyse a second, similar artwork and demonstrate some of the ways in which materiality implicates the conceptual in Alborough's art. I conclude that the way that the term "conceptual art" has previously been applied to his work is restrictive.

Alborough's conceptual impulse

Alborough's untitled installation at the University of Stellenbosch Gallery (formerly a church) in 2000 consisted of a series of structures made from plastic bath mats, plastic cotton reels, cable ties, batteries and nails. The structures mimicked the shape of the gallery's stained glass windows (Figure 1). Alborough installed the structures, which rested on large pieces of white fabric soaked in saline solution, on the floor of the gallery. Wires connected the nails to battery packs, sending an electrical current through the nails that caused them to corrode. Drawings were produced as the rusty residue from the corrosion bled onto the fabric on which the structures rested (Figure 2). Alborough recorded the sound of the corrosion process, amplified it, and played in the gallery accompanying the installation. Thus, the structures can be thought of as drawing machines that created drawings on the fabric through a process of corrosion. Alborough's drawing machines are reminiscent of Jean Tinguely's drawing machines[1] that questioned notions of artistic authorship and the creative process through the reliance on chance within the drawing process. Once the fabric was saturated, Alborough exhibited the rust drawings on the walls of the gallery (as can be seen in Figure 1). The result was a dynamic installation in which the pattern of the stained glass windows was repeated in the structures and the drawings on the walls.

1. Jean Tinguely (1925-1991) was a Swiss Surrealist who constructed elaborate drawing machines as a means of incorporating the elements of chance into the drawing process. For more, see Tinguely [sp].

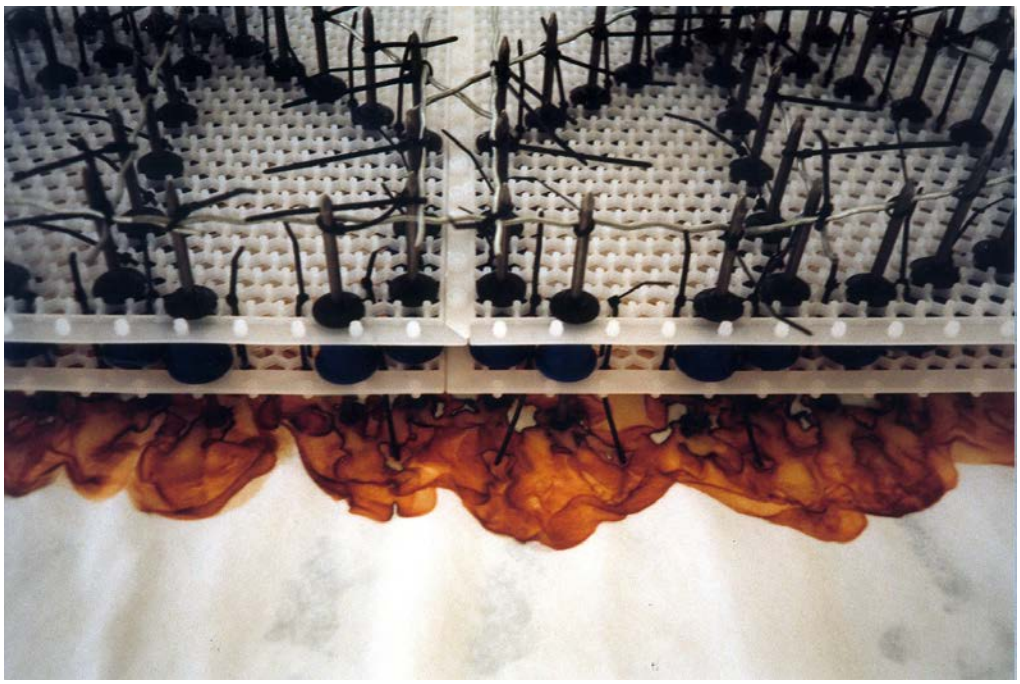

FIGURE **Nº 2**

Alan Alborough, Untitled installation at the University of Stellenbosch Gallery, 2000. Detail showing the corrosion process. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

Through creating machines that made drawings, Alborough challenged conventional conceptions of the authorship of art, and by extension, the agency of the artist and the artwork. An element of chance was introduced, as the artist was not completely in control over the rust process used for the drawings, even though the artist chose when to stop the rust process and display the drawings. The suggested lack of control introduced by the process of oxidation to make the drawings contrasts the mathematically precise way in which the drawing machines were made. The contrast here further highlights the artist's role in the creation of the artwork. There were no titles, labels or a catalogue to orientate viewers' engagement with the works. The principal framing device was the actual gallery space that literally resembled a church - pointing to the construction of the museum, and by extension the gallery, as modern day temples.[2] This conspicuous lack of the usual texts that accompany artworks, which orientate the viewers' interpretation, can be understood as a means to foreground the installation itself as the subject of the work. Alborough's untitled installation at the University of Stellenbosch Gallery thus made the process of making, exhibiting and viewing artworks the subject of the exhibition.

2. The idea that the museum can be thought of as a modern day temple is explored by Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach (1980:449) who suggest that through the emulation of this architecture, the 'museum asserts it's descent from the ideological, historical and political reality of imperial Rome'. This monumental architecture is intended to impress upon visitors who use the buildings or pass through their doors societies most revered beliefs and values, and so in the modern world, the museum fulfils the ceremonial function that temples and civic buildings would have in the ancient world.

Alborough's self-reflexive exploration of some conventions of exhibition and his refusal to make artist's statements have been interpreted as the markers par excellence of his conceptual impulse (see, for example, Roper 2000; Klopper 2002; Maurice 2009). When explaining his decision to stop making artist's statements in one of the last interviews Alborough gave, he argued for an art practice that challenges viewers to construct their own meanings when engaging with art (Alborough cited in Richards 1997). Alborough (cited in Richards 1997) stated that he should not be asked to comment on or reinforce viewer's interpretations of his work, since he has chosen to communicate in a visual manner through the artwork. He added that he was also weary of how, in time, artists' statements about their artworks often linger longer than the work itself, superseding the experience of looking at the works. Taking their cues from the few statements Alborough made before deciding not to speak about his work any longer, reviewers have interpreted Alborough's reluctance to talk about his work as a strategy for decentring the artist. I agree with Klopper (2002:[sp]), who interprets Alborough's strategy for challenging the audience to participate in meaning making when engaging with the works as a means of bridging 'the creative gap between the production and consumption of art'. However, rather than inviting dialogue, Alborough's silence seems to illicit anxiety about the meanings of his works, as Roper's (2000:[sp]) review of Alborough's (2000) untitled *Standard Bank Young Artist Award* work (discussed below), which resembled the untitled installation at the Stellenbosch University Art Gallery, suggests. Roper (2000:[sp]) described Alborough as 'a bit of a bastard' because the work is

> opaque and inscrutable, and forces you to torture your brain for references, for emotional clues, for half-remembered insights – anything to help you understand the work and the feelings it arouses in you.

Adjectives such as 'inscrutable' and 'opaque' contribute to the construction of Alborough's works as inaccessible in their conceptualism. Richards (2000:[sp]) refers to the tendency to construct Alborough's works as inaccessible as 'an understandable but unhelpful public response common to Alborough's work'. For Richards, such responses are unhelpful because they prevent viewers from trying to make meaning of the works, which is what Alborough (cited in Richards 1997) hopes for. To ask viewers to make their own meanings when engaging with the work is also to ask viewers to be mindful of the process of interpretation, and to pay closer attention to the works themselves. Paying close attention to works such as Alborough's untitled installation at the University of Stellenbosch Gallery, the striking materiality of the artworks, seen in the relationships between the materials used to construct the drawing machines and the rust drawings, becomes apparent. Although Alborough's self-reflexivity is characteristic of conceptual art,

his deliberate use of specific materials and careful attention to detail in constructing his installations is seemingly at odds with conceptual art practices that ostensibly foreground the dematerialised art object.

The challenge of a conceptualism rooted in materiality

Colin Richards' (2000, 2002) analyses of Alborough's artworks stand out in the critic's attempts to grapple with the uncomfortable relationship between the conceptual and the material in his artworks. In his exploration of what practices define South African conceptual art making practices, Richards (2002:38) argues that it is 'the persistence of materiality' that distinguishes South African conceptual art. Richards (2002:38) posits that the reason that South African artists are more concerned with materiality than the American and European conceptual artists of the 1960s is because of the political and social circumstances of art making in South Africa during the last four decades. In the context of apartheid South Africa, where everyday bureaucracy was steeped in racism, the use of materials that pointed to the everyday, as well as the depiction of everyday events was politically charged. In these instances, as John Peffer (2009) recognises, the use of everyday materials can be understood as a form of resistance.[3]

Richards (2002) cites Alborough's *Heathen Wet Lip* (1998) (Figure 3) as indicative of South African artists' preoccupation with materiality. The title *Heathen Wet Lip* is an anagram for "white elephant"; an unwanted thing that has lost its value or usefulness for the owner, but that is difficult to get rid of. The phrase "white elephant" can also refer to something that is expensive to maintain, whose upkeep costs more than its value. For this site-specific installation, Alborough selected a particular room in the South African National Gallery in Cape Town, in which its colonial architecture was foregrounded. There he created an installation using a mixture of industrial and organic elements, arranged with meticulous attention to the relationships between the parts of the installation, the space, and the lighting. Alborough used dried elephant ears and taxidermied elephant feet to construct what appeared to be the sails and hull of a ship. Sails in the context of a building that utilizes colonial architecture, against the backdrop of the Dutch East India Company Gardens in Cape Town remind me of the sails of Dutch East India Company ships. Even though Alborough did not use the whole elephant to make this work, those parts of the elephant that have been used are intact and recognisable as particular hunter trophies. Elephant ears were dried to be hung on walls, and taxidermied elephant feet were routinely used as pedestals for tables in living rooms,

3. A similar argument is made by Maurice (2011:101), who criticises the narrow definition of 'resistance art' as art with an overt political message, calling instead for an understanding of artworks that in their use of non-traditional material are a form of cultural resistance that has political overtones. For example, the fragmented surfaces of Sam Nhlengethwa's collages that depict aspects of everyday life can be thought of as metaphors for the literal and structural violence of the times.

FIGURE **Nº 3**

Alan Alborough, *Heathen Wet Lip*, 1998. Installation view, South African National Gallery. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

or made into canteen tables in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[4] Despite the fact that Alborough obtained the elephant's ears and feet from the Kruger National Park, which routinely culls elephants to preserve the environment (Williamson 2009), the use of actual elephant body parts in this installation is somewhat shocking in view of their vulnerable status. The fragmented, objectified parts of once-living elephants, which link to the histories indexed above, elicits an emotive response in viewers that would not be so potent had some kind of substitute been used. Alborough's use of elephants' ears and elephant foot tables, however acquired, indexes their past usage as hunters' trophies, and their appearance on jumble sales across the European colonial empires, long after such trophies had gone out of fashion. This fits in with their 'white elephant' status as suggested by the title of the work. In this work, the meaning is embodied in the object and the manner in which it is presented. The mutilated elephant, understood as synecdoche for the African continent and its people, is here made into an image suggestive of colonial

4. These practices continue today. It is possible to buy contemporary elephant footstools, made to order, online. For more see Elephant Foot Table Mounts [sp].

ships, which could be interpreted as a comment that the plundering of Africa has led to the wealth of the west. In the wake of colonial exploitation, Africa is now the white elephant: it has lost its value and is rendered somewhat useless. *Heathen Wet Lip* is an example of an artist harnessing the power of association through using provocative materials, and manipulating the mechanisms of display in the field of exhibition, to create an artwork that enables viewers to think in different and nuanced ways about the subject of the artwork.

Richards' (2002) term 'the persistence of materiality' to describe a particular South African conceptualism is provocative, because it foregrounds the material aspects of the artworks which is contrary to the dematerialisation associated with conceptual art. In art history terms, materiality is associated with the formalism that the conceptual artists were trying to challenge (Lippard, 1997:12). Margaret Iversen and Stephen Melville (2010:61) argue that formalists are concerned with 'the primacy of the visual in the experience of art; 2) the irreducibility of some notion of a "work" of art; 3) the necessity of criticism'. Thus, within formalist interpretations of modernist artworks, the form and medium are considered the vehicles of meaning, while the contexts of production and reception of the artwork are frequently ignored.

Approaching the material in Alborough's work

Critics who regard Alborough primarily as a conceptual artist shy away from the materiality in his work because to discuss the materiality of his work must entail a process of untangling notions of the material from the formalism that the conceptual artists sought to challenge. After engaging with works such as the untitled installation at the University of Stellenbosch gallery, I argue that to ignore the material in Alborough's work is to miss the point of such works. So in what other ways could we approach the material in Alborough's work? I suggest that it is possible to get around the limitations of the concept of materiality implied by formalism, by adopting a social - anthropological approach to materiality. The concept of materiality as it is used by social anthropologists Daniel Miller (2005) and Ian Woodward (2007) is useful for art analyses because it points to the complexities of the possible meanings of objects, and draws our attention to the manner in which objects are entangled in processes of social and cultural reproduction. For Miller (2005:4), materiality not only refers to the physicality of objects, but also their expressive capacity, which is the capacity of objects to hold the different meanings that we confer upon them as they move through different social spaces. Miller (2005:4) argues that materiality refers to '… the ephemeral, the imaginary, the biological and the theoretical; all that

which would have been external to the simple definition of an artefact.' Likewise, for Woodward (2007:55) materiality denotes '… the relations between people and objects, especially the way in which social life is inherently structured by everyday dealings with objects, such as technology or objects of memory.'

These definitions suggest that materiality encompasses more than the mere physicality of objects; it includes the relationship between objects and the systems in which they operate. Furthermore, Woodward's definition of materiality brings people and objects together. This resonates with Miller's (2005:5) concept of the humility of things, in which objects are understood as having agency to shape us as much as we shape them. Implied in these social anthropological conceptions of materiality is the idea that because the meaning of objects is partly contingent on the systems in which they are located, as objects move through different spaces, they will acquire new significances. This idea has been explored by Arjun Appadurai (1986), who argues that it is through the processes of circulation that things can be said to have 'a social life' because their meaning is culturally embedded, and changes as they circulate. Appadurai (1986:5) suggests, therefore, that the meaning of things is inscribed 'in their forms, their use, and their trajectories'. Appadurai (1986:5) concludes that if one is trying to find meanings other than the use-meaning of objects, one must look at 'the things in motion'. One such motion is when objects are removed from everyday circulation and recontextualised into the field of art. When objects such as plastic tables, cable ties, and other everyday hardware items are used in artworks, the meanings that accrue to these objects are brought into the field of exhibition and become part of the signifying process of the artwork. Moreover, such conceptions of materiality allow for the consideration of the changed status of the found objects as they move into the field of exhibition, and are now "art".

The social anthropological understanding of materiality retains the social and political aspects of the meanings that accrue to objects as part of the signifying structures in the artworks, thereby avoiding formalist reductivism. Broader possibilities of interpretation emerge for the discussion of the materiality of conceptual artworks when art historians adopt social anthropological views of materiality, such as those shared by Miller (2005) and Woodward (2007). This approach to materiality also resonates with Arthur Danto's (2013:37) suggestion that 'in artworks, unlike sentences with subjects and predicates, the meanings are embodied in the object'.

Embodied meaning

To apply a social anthropological reading of the materiality of Alborough's works would entail focussing on the materiality of the objects used to create them, as well as the contexts in which they were viewed. It is significant that Alborough used new, as yet unused, mass-produced objects to create his untitled installation at the University of Stellenbosch Gallery, and that he used similar materials and processes for his untitled *Standard Bank Young Artist Award*[5] (2000; Figure 4) installations. The plastic tables, fluorescent lights, plastic tubes, cable ties, fabric, nails and plastic cotton reels he used to create this installation were arguably selected because of their banality, and their physical qualities, which enabled them to be joined in particular ways to other objects. Cable ties are appreciated mostly for their ability to 'do work' around the house, to hang clothes, to close sugar packets, to join things together; they are incredibly strong and almost indestructible. These quotidian objects have no 'aura' in Walter Benjamin's (1968) terms. They are factory produced, and since Alborough purchased them from the factories where they were made, they had no history, and therefore no authenticity.[6] Alborough exploits the contrast between the ontological status of the cheap, mass-produced and readily available objects used to make the artworks, and the ontological status of the resultant artworks as "art".

The installation, which changed as the exhibition travelled from one gallery to another in South Africa for a year, comprised numerous rectangular sculptures which followed two designs. The two types of structures worked together with the other materials used to create the drawings, as parts of a whole installation that was reconfigured as it moved to different galleries. The first types, labelled 'corrosion devices' by Edmunds (2000:[sp]), were made from children's plastic water tables that were stacked on top of each other. A white fluorescent light shone from between the stacked tables, producing one of the few light sources in the exhibition, since the lighting in the galleries in which these artworks were exhibited was deliberately kept low. The result was that the sculptures appeared to glow, as if taken directly from a science fiction film set. The tables were kept together with clamps that were placed at regular intervals along the edges of the tables; cable ties, reminiscent of the hairs on hairy caterpillars, protruded from these clamps. All the elements worked together to produce an industrial aesthetic, maintained through the mathematical precision with which the sculptures were made. The time it took to construct these machine-like sculptures was at odds with the disposable nature of the materials used to create them. There was minimal use of colour: black, white and silver. Everything appeared controlled, deliberate,

5. The Standard Bank Young Artist Award is a prestigious art award sponsored by the Standard Bank of South Africa in which a visual artist, under 38, who has shown outstanding achievement in their field, but who may not yet have achieved national or international acclaim, is given a sum of money to produce a solo exhibition as part of the main programme of the Standard Bank National Arts Festival in Grahamstown. The exhibition is customarily accompanied by a catalogue, and travels to different venues across the country for the year of the award (for more information, see Maurice 2009).

6. In an email to the author, Alan Albo rough (2013) stated that he purchased the objects used to make these works in large quantities from the factories that produced them.

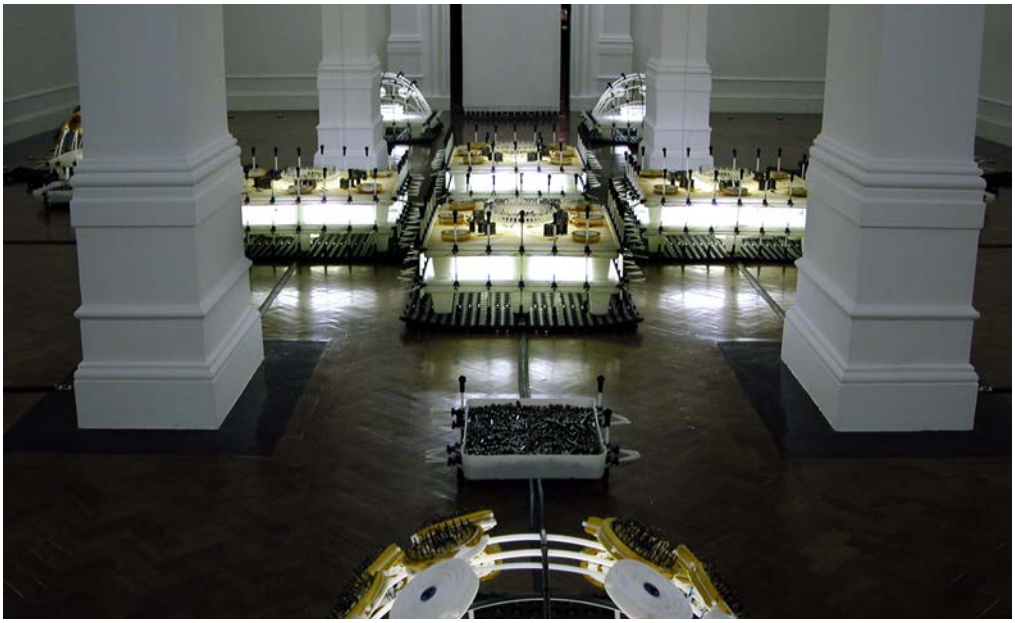

FIGURE **Nº 4**

Alan Alborough, Untitled, *Standard Bank Young Artist Award,* 2000. Installation view, South African National Gallery. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

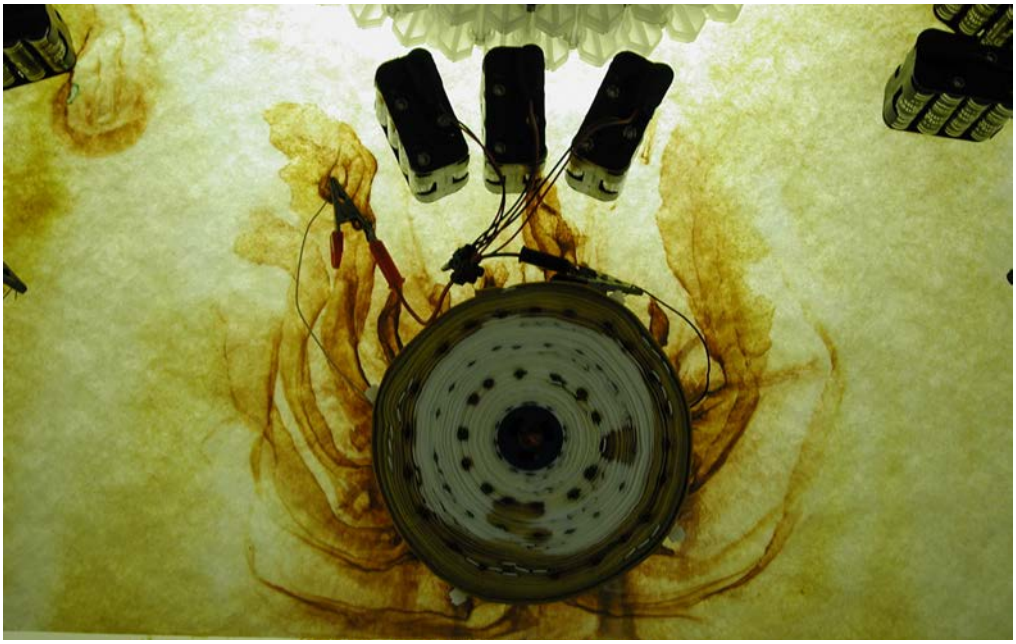

FIGURE **Nº 5**

Alan Alborough, Untitled, *Standard Bank Young Artist Award*, 2000. Installation detail: close up of 'corrosion device', Monument Gallery, Grahamstown. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

measured, and orderly. On the table top, coils of white fabric soaked in saline solution, with nails imbedded in them at regular intervals, were placed on large sheets of thick white paper. Just as with the untitled exhibition at the Stellenbosch University Gallery, wires connected the nails to battery packs, which sent an electrical current through the nails. This caused the nails to corrode, thereby speeding up the natural processes of rusting and oxidation. The corrosion resulted in a rusty residue that bled on to the paper on which these coils were placed, producing drawings (Figure 5). The drawings were displayed with the 'corrosion devices', accumulating over the duration of the exhibition.

A second type of rectangular sculpture, which I refer to as 'display devices', was created to hold the used coils after they became saturated with rusty residue; the 'display devices' were exhibited with the 'corrosion devices' and the drawings. The 'display devices' appeared different from the 'corrosion devices' in that they consisted of plastic tubing, joined at regular intervals, in a grid-like formation, to create a dome-like structure over the plastic tables at their base. Like the corrosion devices, each dome structure was lit from below with fluorescent lighting. Spokes made from cotton reels were placed at each of the nodes of the dome. It was to these spokes that the used coils from the corrosion devices were attached. In creating 'drawing machines', and subsequently exhibiting the drawings made by the machines alongside the machines as part of the travelling exhibition, Alborough makes the art making process the subject of this body of works. This could be construed as a critique of art competitions like the Standard Bank Young Artist Award, in which the artist is given a sum of money to make a body of works to be exhibited, thereby compelling the winning artist to make artworks on demand, so to speak.

A number of contrasts were explored in this body of works. The uncontrollable process of corrosion resulting in organic forms created by the rust was the antithesis of the precision with which the 'drawing machines' were created. This introduced an element of chance, suggesting that despite our attempts to control the creative process, we cannot escape an element of chance. In order to surrender to the chance process of corrosion, Alborough had to relinquish authorial control to some degree. However, as Klopper (2002:[sp]), points out, while Alborough may be seen to have done this in setting up a process that completes itself, his authorial presence was nevertheless re-inserted at key moments as the exhibition travelled from venue to venue. Alborough maintained control over the manner in which the exhibition was reconfigured at each venue. For each installation, he chose to display the resultant corrosive drawings and other materials in particular ways. He meticulously documented each installation as the exhibition travelled. Instead of creating a catalogue, he created a website where he uploaded the documentations of each

installation. The website included any articles written about the works, as well as a record of the comments from the audience.[7] The installations were temporary, and there was thus an ironic contrast between the permanence of the plastic materials and the impermanence of the installation, and the corrosion drawings produced throughout the yearlong exhibition. A further irony is that the corrosive process, which is a process of decay, is used to create artworks in this series of works. As the installation moved from gallery to gallery, at the start of each new exhibition, new batteries, paper, and coils were attached to the corrosion devices, beginning the process again. All the materials, including the used coils of fabric, spent batteries and drawings from previous exhibitions were exhibited as part of the next installation (Figure 4). Everything that was used to create the drawings was exhibited; nothing was wasted. This strategy meant that no two installations were alike. The series of exhibitions can be thought of as a "living artwork" that was only completed at the end of the exhibition run. This is an inversion of convention, in which "finished artworks" are exhibited. For the duration of the exhibitions, everything used to create the artworks and the debris from the corrosion machines, as well as the resultant drawings, was exhibited. Through this, all the objects occupied the same ontological space as "art". That the sculptures were dismantled after the exhibition caused yet another shift in the ontological status of these objects; they were formerly art, and were then relegated back to the everyday.[8]

Within these sculptures, the individual found objects in the conglomerates lose their individuality almost completely within the whole. This emphasises that despite being selected for their physical qualities and their social associations with the quotidian and the banal, the objects were used as materials much like painters might use paint from tubes to create a painting. Even though the use of industrial objects is customarily a sign of the removal of the artists' labour, and is linked to the challenges of the institutions of art by the historic and neo avant-garde, in this series of works, the industrially manufactured elements stand in contrapuntal relationship with the careful precision that the artist has used to make them. Through contrasting the banality of the materials with the labour intensive method of art making, Alborough overturns the discourses associated with the ways in which the found object challenge notions of artistic labour. Thus, these works are not merely conceptual; in their complex materiality, they challenging the ways in which conceptual artists grapple with issues of labour, chance, and the field of exhibition.

7. This website is still active, and available at www.alanalborough.co.za

8. Alan Alborough (2015) states 'The works from those shows came back to me and in time I dismantled most of them. I reuse bits if and when possible. I still have the corroded elements (still corroding) boxed away in my studio – none of them were re-articulated as other artworks, sold or went anywhere.'

Material conceptualism

My exploration of Alborough's works takes the idea of a conceptual impulse grounded in materialism, as suggested by Richards (2002:38), further. I have argued that it is in Alborough's engagement with the materiality of the objects he uses to create his artworks that his particular conceptualism can be found. Through his works, Alborough demonstrates that rather than being opposed, the work of abstracting conceptually in and through art relies on the materiality of that art. Alborough invites viewers to consider the interplay of the material and the conceptual that coalesce to produce meaning in his works. Alborough complicates the opposition between the conceptual and the material, and creates a set of associated oppositions between the "found" and the "made", the "mass-produced or "original", the "utilitarian object" and the "aesthetic object", and the "permanent" and the "processual" that has often been taken for granted in the history of art criticism. Alborough's exploration is not presented as a simple dichotomy. The use of installation and mechanical and chemical drawing processes further challenge the singularity of the artwork, and the role of the artist, complicating the relationships that are set up in his field of exhibition. Meaning in Alborough's work thus rests not only in the idea, but also in the physical construction and display of the work and in the associations, which the objects he uses to create his installations bring, with them into the field of exhibition. Materiality itself implicates the conceptual in Alborough's works. They therefore challenge the unhelpful dichotomy that has hindered, rather than helped us to understand how art necessarily takes hold of, mobilises or is mediated by materiality, even when it seems to foreground concepts, meanings and ideas.

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