



# Material agency in art installations: exploring the interplay of art, space, and materials in Detroit

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**Abstract.** Decades of decline, disinvestment, and racism have left Detroit with an abundance of abandoned buildings, ruins, vacant lots, and illicit trash dumps. Though these structures and materials might have forfeited their previous purposes, they can act as catalysts, substances, and co-creators of artworks. The paper is thus interested in examining the intricate interplay between art, space, and materiality in Detroit further. Drawing from the practices of local artists Olayami Dabls and Scott Hocking, the paper adopts a new materialist framework to investigate the dynamic agency of matter in the artistic process. By considering materials as active participants in the production of art and space, the paper seeks to add to the emerging interest in the emancipation and meaning making of material in art as well as cultural geography's engagements with new materialism.

## 1 Introduction

And so, for many years, like the Packard Plant, and like so many buildings, I would go in there, I'd walk around, I'd explore and if I saw things that I thought were valuable or usable to my artwork and my art practice, I'd take them and then make a sculpture out of them or incorporate them into an installation. ... And so, a lot of the places I decided to work on site were places that I had already spent so much time inside of and developed a relationship with and I loved being inside them and I wanted to work inside them instead of taking things out of them. (Ride-along with Scott Hocking, June 2017, Detroit)

But one thing about art that we seem to forget as people is that they don't need to know the story. The art itself is the best conveyer of information without using knowledge. ... And that's what I find the most important is that people ... just see ... the stuff I have out there and come back in here crying. They've had an emotional experience with how I just arranged things. (Interview with Olayami Dabls, May 2017, Detroit)

The way Dabls “just arranged things” seems like an understatement when wandering through the sculpture garden at his MBAD African Bead Museum on Detroit's west side: through installations composed of iron, mirrors, rocks, and wood, and with some additional paint, Dabls creates metaphors that refer to, among others, the Middle Passage and cultural assimilation. What is even more remarkable is that all materials but the paint were found in the city. This way of co-creating art with discarded or abandoned materials and objects is a reoccurring practice among several artists in the city of Detroit – as is also apparent in the quote above by the artist Scott Hocking. While for some, the process of roaming about the city and specifically searching and discovering material is central, others focus on the recycling and reassembling of material. Discovering abandoned materials, objects, or ruins in Detroit, however, has been a rather easy task: the “decades-long disaster that has resulted in the traumatization of resident populations, the severing of local social networks, the devastation of neighborhood economies, and the gradual physical destruction of much of the built environment” (Draus et al., 2019:154) also created a state of city-wide abandonment and ruination that makes an abundance of discarded material available. Despite the recovery efforts by the city government as well as corporate investments, ruins and vacant lots are still a defining feature of De-

troit. Artifacts as small as a plushie and objects as large as an abandoned multi-story building act as catalysts, substances, and co-creators of artworks. Through repurposing and transforming what might otherwise be regarded as waste, artists produce spaces that have diverse values, meanings, and stories (Küttel, 2022:131ff.).

While there is plenty of research on ruins in Detroit (Apel, 2015; Dobraszcyk, 2017; Kinney, 2016; Pohl, 2019, 2021), it has only sparsely looked closer at the materiality of ruins in terms of its agency and active participation in the process of meaning making. However, research in art history and art education has started to move its focus from objects and materials, often applying a new materialist framework that recognizes “the relational, co-creative and ever-evolving connections between all agents” (Jain and Roy, 2022:431; see also Berger and Schlitte, 2021; Bredekamp and Schäffner, 2020; Franinović and Kirschner, 2020; Garber, 2019; Hood and Kraehe, 2017; Lehmann, 2009; Leonard, 2020).

I take these different but converging observations as an inspiration to look at the empirical data of my research, which I did as part of my dissertation on the interactions between art and space in Detroit (Küttel, 2022), from a new perspective. While the materiality of the artworks I examined already played a role in the initial research, it was rather subordinate: my original approach looked at the production of art and the production of space from a combined perspective of spatial theory and socially engaged art. However, since collecting, finding, and reusing objects and materials was central to many of the artistic practices I investigated, I am interested in scrutinizing whether a new materialist approach can bring new insights.

Based on Harriet Hawkins’ (2017:xvii) observation that “space is not a mute, already existing background across which art is produced and consumed, [but] rather the making of art and the making of space are entwined”, I am particularly interested in the role materials take as active participants in the reciprocal relationship of art and space. I will explore this further by looking through a new materialist lens (Bennett, 2004, 2010). For this, I will look at two examples from my empirical data to think about what a new materialist approach interested in the vibrancy and agency of matter could offer a geographic study on the production of art, including the process of meaning making and art creation. This involves looking at both the production of art and the artwork – however, the artworks discussed here should particularly not be understood as finished results as they still change, mutate, or disappear. I will discuss this by zooming in on the works of two local artists, Olayami Dabls and Scott Hocking, and their artistic material practices. Material practices are here understood as artistic practices that have as their focus materials “embedded with meaning prior to their role in art making” (Barrett, 2020:353). The paper contributes to geography’s engagements with visual art by taking into account material agency in the process of art making and seeks to add to the emerging interest in the “emancipation of the material

in art” (Berger and Schlitte, 2021:20) and its meaning making as well as geography’s engagements with (new) materialism (Anderson and Tolia-Kelly, 2004; Kirsch, 2013, 2015; Whatmore, 2006).

This paper is structured into three major sections: in the first section, I explore the relationship of art, space, and materiality by focusing on their diverse entanglements. Having established this theoretical framework, I give a short overview of Detroit’s history, particularly addressing the city’s urban crisis. To segue into the empirical section of the paper, I will briefly touch upon the methodical procedure of the underlying study. Drawing on an ethnographic approach, the empirical section of the paper first investigates the material practices of the two visual artists that are at the center. Second, it reveals the materials’ roles in the production of art. In the final section, the paper concludes with condensing the findings and offering some final conceptual thoughts on researching the entanglements of artistic practices, space, and materiality.

## 2 Art, space, and materiality

The relationship between the arts and (urban) space has been vividly discussed for decades: especially in post-industrial cities of the Global North, the model of the arts as “a new economic base” (Miles, 2005:889) that boosts urban regeneration and economic upturn has become well-established (Markusen and Schrock, 2006). City officials, cultural organizations, and private investors seek to foster urban development by strategically using the arts for image improvement, tourist attraction, or planned gentrification (Scherzinger, 2017:36–37). But it is no longer only the anticipated economic benefit that makes artists attractive to urban-regeneration strategies. It is also their (presumed) social impact that is often expected to be implemented through community engagement or public artworks (Yezbick, 2014). Nonetheless, this is just as much part of neoliberal urban governance in so far as the states’ responsibilities are relocated to artists who often work in precarious employment conditions and are dependent on private funding (Berger, 2018:17, 57–58; Yezbick, 2014).

Closely connected is a social turn within the arts that describes “the phenomenon by which more and more artists understand the shaping and transformation of social relations as an important part of their practice” (van den Berg, 2019:3). What has gained momentum in the past decades particularly, though, is socially engaged art practices “wherein artists take the social site, including its community, as subject, material and audience” (Hawkins, 2012:56). Socially engaged art practices are often confronted with specific expectations concerning either their social and political impact or their aesthetics. Yet, following art critic Claire Bishop (2012), I regard the aesthetic, social, and political aspects of socially engaged art rather as existing with each other. This also entails accepting and negotiating the contradiction of the “be-

lief in art's autonomy and in it being inextricably bound to the promise of a better world to come" (Bishop, 2012:29). Barrett, however, argues that accounts of this "expanding field" of art (Lippard, 1997; Krauss, 1979) also often have "a deeper rooted lack of material literacy" (Barrett, 2020:355) and thus suggests that "vocalising sculpture in material terms – it's mass, surfaces, fragments – has the capacity to uncover and illuminate social practices, hidden histories and new tactile encounters" (Barrett, 2020:370).

This already hints at not only the social but also the material relations that take part in the production of art and the production of space. I, therefore, regard the whole process of art making as a relational practice and draw from perspectives that emphasize the relations of society, urban space, materiality, and art as powerful ties that influence and produce each other (Hawkins, 2017; Hildebrandt, 2012; Luger, 2017; Paglen, 2014; Scherzinger, 2017). Thereby, the material is assigned a particular meaning and an active role. This connects to current discussions about materiality where materials, following Latour (2007:63ff.), have agency and are active participants (or actors) in the production of social relations (Frers and Meier, 2016:2). Moving "beyond the object fetishism" and towards a "renewed sensitivity ... to demonstrate how the qualities that mark space-time, and bind space-time into wider sets of relations, change according to the processual movements of matter" (Anderson and Tolia-Kelly, 2004:669) allows for focusing on "what matter *does* rather than what its essence *is*" (Anderson and Tolia-Kelly, 2004:672, emphasis in original). But materials, too, have "very specific temporalities and spatialities" (Anderson and Tolia-Kelly, 2004:669); they are "constantly changing, exchanging, and diffracting, blending, mutating, influencing, and working inseparably" (Hickey-Moody, 2020:725).

Similarly, Hawkins (2014:10) points out the following: "to re-orientate understandings of art away from thinking of it as offering access to a presence – as standing for something – but rather to think about art as something, something that produces effects, produces difference, when coupled with other bodies". It is a shift towards asking "what art can do (rather than what it means) and also what it can set in motion" (Hawkins, 2014:10; see also Hickey-Moody, 2020:724). Further, Barrett (2020:364), based on Wagner (2015:27), describes "material as information carrier" referring to the "narratives that material carries with it from historical and contemporary contexts" (Barrett, 2020:370) and the "social and political meanings" (Barrett, 2020:364) that it embodies. Accordingly, Hickey-Moody (2020:725) describes "the materials that are molded, and craft practices that are employed in the process of making, [as] collaborators, and the physical nature of their form is central to how making happens". As collaborators, they always appear in relation to others (humans and non-humans) (Hood and Kraeche, 2017:35). Regarding them as collaborators that have agency, then, de-centers humans as those that have ultimate power (Benson, 2019:259). Bennett (2010:viii.) therefore introduces

the term "distributive agency", understanding "power as far more complex and infinitely intertwined. Power is among all material bodies, both human and more-than-human, and therefore does not belong to bodies independently, but rather happens because material bodies are always dependent on one another" (Hood and Kraeche, 2017:35). The coming together of material bodies, the entanglement of materials, can also be understood as assemblages which are "groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. ... They have uneven topographies, because some of the points at which the various affects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others, and so power is not distributed equally across its surface" (Bennett, 2010:23–24). An assemblage is dynamic, changeable, and unbounded with "a distinctive history of formation [and] a finite life span" (Bennett, 2010:24).

### 3 Historical context of Detroit's urban crisis

Newspaper articles appearing in the 2010s not only tried to frame art and artists being active in Detroit as a new or newcomer phenomenon but also described them as saviors of a bankrupt Detroit (Conlin, 2015; La Force, 2014; Tolf, 2014; Ewert, 2015), often playing into the hands of the narrative of Detroit as a blank slate, falsely depicting the city and its residents as passive, incapable of acting and in need of external aid (on how these depictions reproduce colonial wordings and are deeply racist, see, e.g., Fraser, 2018; Safran-sky, 2014; Hackworth, 2019; Kinney, 2016; and Draus et al., 2010). Detroit had its own art movement between the mid-1960s and late 1970s, the Cass Corridor Movement, named after Cass Avenue, where most of its activities agglomerated (Cummings, 1980:5). The Cass Corridor Movement is particularly interesting here since many of the artists involved have similarities concerning their practice to the artists I will focus on below: the mostly visual but also performing and literary artists came to be known for crossing boundaries, experimenting with tools and found materials. Apel (2001:22) describes these as "efforts [that] might be better described as departures from the conventionally beautiful in the attempt to define a new aesthetic" which included an "emphasis on process" (Belloli, 1980:44) of creation, destruction, and transition as well as an "unconventional approach to materials and form" (Jacob, 1980:35).

The Cass Corridor Movement was active during a time when Detroit's urban crisis was already unfolding. What happened in and to Detroit, as Jerry Herron (2007:669) puts it, is "a matter of design. In that sense, Detroit is no exceptional place; on the contrary, it is the most representatively American place on the planet". This hints at the structural causes that led to the city losing almost two-thirds of its residents between 1950 and 2018, the largest proportion of them being White. The continuing devastation of residents and the built environment is a combination of several causes such as

the legacy of institutional racism, redlining, and racialized mortgage lending (Taylor, 2019); the massive outward migration from the city to the suburbs that eroded the city's tax base and created an excess supply of rather inferior and less valuable dwellings in the inner city (Galster, 2012); (failed) attempts of urban renewal and the construction of highways that erased entire neighborhoods and displaced residents (Sugrue, 1996); and the challenge of the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial city as well as an increasingly neoliberal urban development shaped by austerity (Galster, 2017).

As the city was unable to efficiently address the myriad of issues, the downward spiral of population decline, deterioration of housing stock, widespread poverty, high unemployment rates, and high crime rates continued for decades. By 2010, Detroit's population was just over 700 000, which is a loss of more than a million residents in almost 60 years. This is also reflected in relatively high vacancy rates, reckoned to be between 20 % and 30 % (Drawing Detroit, 2019).

In 2013, when the city was unable to fulfill its obligations and was on the way toward insolvency, it declared bankruptcy. While this allowed the city to be freed from obligations, it also created an even larger window of opportunity for entrepreneurial and neoliberal urban governance. It comes as no surprise that after the bankruptcy case was settled, public-private partnerships, land speculation, the conversion of formally subsidized buildings into market-rate apartments, and the rebranding of neighborhoods persisted, if not even reinforced. Concentrated on rather small areas in the city, these efforts intensified socio-spatial disparities where the majority-Black neighborhoods continued to be neglected (Farley, 2015; Kreichauf, 2017; Kurashige, 2017). While it is important to review the individual case of Detroit's (way into) bankruptcy, it is still not an "isolated, unique, or indeed local phenomenon. Rather, the city has been a notable pressure point in a historic process of financial intensification, unevenly experienced and realized" (Peck and White-side, 2016:261).

The histories of place can be understood as "layers of social relations accumulating over time. Each new layer interacts with and 'merges' with previous layers in a process which adds new characteristics and changes existing ones, or may even suppress and obliterate aspects of the 'old'" (Massey and Jess, 1995:222). Unraveling Detroit's past and its continuities – albeit very shortened here – is, therefore, a necessary undertaking when analyzing socio-spatial and material relations. It helps in situating and understanding the artistic material practices that work with abandoned and discarded materials and objects as well as inside abandoned and decaying buildings. Keeping this deep entanglement of space and time in mind allows for conceptualizing ruins as transient in a material as well as cultural and social sense. They might seem left over and stagnant, but they are always in process: they might be deteriorating further, and/or someone or something might alter or erase them. To highlight this processual

character, Darroch (2015), drawing on Edensor (2005b), describes this as the "transformational character of ruins" (Darroch, 2015:307).

#### 4 Ethnographic approach

The artistic material practices that are at the center of this paper are part of the findings of a larger project that was interested in the dialectic relationship of urban space and artistic practices more generally (Küttel, 2022). The methodical approach for this paper was therefore also part of this larger project where I combined literature research and sources such as newspaper and art magazine articles, websites, blogs, and social media with ethnographic research including interviews, participant observations, and a ride-along in Detroit between 2016 and 2019. These different methodical steps were often taken in parallel and intertwined, and they were supplemented by modes of introspection: since I understand doing research as an embodied practice that is also based on my positionality and the situatedness of my knowledge, I acknowledge that I can only tell partial stories (Katz, 1992, 1994). To reflect on these partialities and, at least to some extent, disclose my positionality, I used an autoethnographic photo essay that is discussed elsewhere in more depth (Küttel, 2021).

The field-based practice of ethnography that focuses on "what people *do* as well as what they *say*" (Herbert, 2000:552, emphasis in original) allowed me to combine interviews and observations in situ in a rather explorative and unstructured manner to "uncover the *processes* and *meanings* that undergird sociospatial life" (Herbert, 2000:550, emphasis in original). In the following discussion, I will focus on the material practices of two artists: Olayami Dabls (usually referred to as Dabls) and Scott Hocking. I conducted interviews with both and met one of them (Scott) for a ride-along again a couple of weeks after our interview. The interview with Dabls was conducted on site at his art environment (MBAD African Bead Museum), which I visited before and after our interview. The interviews were supplemented by other source material on the two artists such as observations from exhibition openings and public art talks; photographs of their works; and publications in newspapers, magazines, blogs, and other websites.

I analyzed and assorted the material in an iterative process of inductive and data-driven open coding. Thereby, I identified the specific artistic material practice that I will discuss in the following (the artistic material practice is one of five artistic practices that I identified in the gathered material; for an overview and analysis of the other four, see Küttel, 2022).

However, an important limitation of this methodical approach needs to be mentioned here: while I was able to talk with the artists about their process of the creation of art, I was not able to join (and observe) them whilst doing this. So, as best as I could, I listened to what the materials in-



Figure 1. Concrete stained by metal (photo by author, May 2017).

volved would “tell” me, and I observed and followed the assemblages they formed and emerged from. Still, I heavily rely on the descriptions of the artists as well as my observations while visiting Dabls’ installations as well as dissecting the additional source material depicting, describing, and discussing Scott’s and Dabls’ artworks. After all, this seems to be a rather human-centered procedure that I have no solution for at this point but feel it is important to make it transparent and think about it for further research. I will return to this in a final reflection at the end of this paper.

In the following two chapters, I will take a closer look at two selected installations by Dabls and Scott, respectively, to explore the entanglements of artistic practices, space, and materiality. The two installations I chose for this purpose, *Iron Teaching Rocks How to Rust* (Dabls) and *Ziggurat and Fisher Body 21* (Scott Hocking), both consist of discarded and found materials and are among the most well-known artworks of the respective artists. While the ziggurat is long gone, *Iron Teaching Rocks How to Rust* still exists today.

## 5 Repurposing and reconfiguring, searching and encountering

When walking in outdoor art environments such as the MBAD African Bead Museum and others today in Detroit, it seems like there is nothing that cannot be incorporated into artworks: glimmering fragments of mirrors and rusted iron,

a model airplane, and piles of toys and trophies are just a few examples of the many materials and objects that are now (parts of) artworks. What almost all of them have in common is that they were once owned, used, or maintained and that they once had a specific purpose but became obsolete and were discarded or left behind.

About 2 decades ago, Dabls – a former draftsman for General Motors and former curator for the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit (Küttel, 2022:119) – started to clean up a block of vacant (here meaning unoccupied by humans) land and run-down buildings that were given to him to start his MBAD African Bead Museum just outside of Greater Downtown. The vegetation on this vacant and overgrown land had an important role as it stopped and held on to waste which Dabls then found on site: “And one day I was out there, I picked up a piece of concrete with a piece of metal protruding out of it. And the metal had stained the concrete which is, was just small pieces of rock. So, I said, ‘Oh, iron teaching rocks how to rust’. So that became the genesis for the installation” (interview with Olayami Dabls, May 2017, Detroit) (see Fig. 1).

Dabls describes the installation *Iron Teaching Rocks How to Rust* (see Fig. 2) as addressing the forced assimilation of cultures through colonization and slavery. Just like the rocks are never able to rust, Dabls regards the installation as a metaphor for being forced to be “something you cannot be” (interview with Olayami Dabls, May 2017, Detroit). The installation consists of about 20 rocks, placed on chairs, and



**Figure 2.** *Iron Teaching Rocks How to Rust* by Olayami Dabls (photo by author, May 2017).

each rock has a black face painted on them. Arranged in a classroom-like manner, the rocks face a stump that is robed by pieces of iron.

The cleanup not only inspired the theme of the installation but also initiated a practice of recycling. Dabls started to use the materials he found cleaning up the site, recounting it as follows: “You were in the city of Detroit, that most industrialized automotive industry on the planet. So, there was nothing but iron, rocks, and wood all over the place. So, we didn’t need to go to no art store, the only thing we had to buy was liquid nails and screws” (interview with Olayami Dabls, May 2017, Detroit). Regarding the found materials as material witnesses and following them beyond their current assemblage might lead us, among many other paths, back to what Dabls hints at as the automotive industry in Detroit. There, humans, machines, metal alloys such as iron alloy, and thousands of other objects and materials together created cars. As material witnesses that have moved from this assemblage to another one, they still recount the history of an industry that no longer exists in its former magnitude. However, following the iron alloy even further leads us to iron’s fusion with carbon that created the alloy. Even before, the chemical element iron that appears in ores and minerals was extracted in a mine.

What is waste to one understanding is of value to Dabls’ artworks. According to Gidwani and Reddy (2011:1649), “in its negative figurations ‘waste’ has continued to function as a placeholder for material excess; or to put it another way, excess matter”. In a capitalist society that thrives on superfluity, waste is and must be constantly produced. But waste is also a “mobile description of that which has been cast out or judged superfluous in a particular space–time” (Gidwani and Reddy, 2011:1649). Consequently, there is no one understanding of waste but several that depend on the space and

time in which it is situated. Usually, however, “regimes of disposal have developed systematic modes of expelling unwanted matter so that it may no longer be confronted” (Edensor, 2005b:315). What is considered waste and disposed of, thus, is erased or at least hidden from the public view. This is different, as Edensor (2005b:317) points out, with “ruinous matter [that] has not been consigned to burial or erasure, and still bears the vague traces of its previous use and context, however opaque”.

With the installation *Iron Teaching Rocks How to Rust* Dabls materially as well as verbally (he describes himself as a storyteller and a visit to the MBAD often involves listening to him telling a story) created a metaphor of iron that teaches rocks how to rust in order to assimilate and deteriorate the rocks. This process of assimilation and deterioration, however, cannot be achieved, at least not in a material way as the rocks resist to rust.

But it is even more than that iron, rocks, and wood are “participants” (Latour, 2007:71) in the creation of the installation as well as its meaning making by collaborating with the artist; with each other; and with other human and non-human actors – from visitors to weather elements. Fused together and remaining this way past their obsolescence, iron and rocks even initiated the installation by what Dabls perceived as the iron’s attempt to rust the rock. It is through these several entanglements that the metaphor emerges for Dabls. The installation is thus not something that he just created but the entanglements of iron, rocks, the specific arrangement of the materials, the stories Dabls tells about it, the visitors that experience them in different ways, and other tangible and intangible elements that all come together to perform stories. Concerning the weather elements, for example, Dabls describes it as “working with nature which is: ‘You do it and I [= nature] take it from there’. You know it’s really simple,

‘Hey, don’t worry about colors clashing, don’t worry about perspective, don’t worry, we’ll take care of that, you just put it out there’” (interview with Olayami Dabls, May 2017, Detroit). By speaking as “nature”, Dabls vividly foregrounds the active role and efficacy of non-human actors involved in the production of art and space, while, at the same time, he de-centers the artist as the one having ultimate power over the artwork. Giving attention to this material agency also blurs “the division between human and material intention” (Barrett, 2020:353), and it allows us to examine the social relations produced within these collaborations. Following the metal-intruded rock further, and I can only speculate here, I assume that they were once separate items that were morphed together, maybe as part of a building structure, fused by machines and/or humans to create something new, albeit temporary. They are once again a reminder of something that was and is not anymore, at least in its previous configuration, but that is entangled in new formations.

While for Dabls the materials and their repurposing and reconfiguring are the foundation of his work, for Scott also the process of searching for and encountering materials is an essential part of his practice.

Scott Hocking has spent most of his life living near or in Detroit and has profound knowledge of the city. He often creates large-scale sculptures of discarded or abandoned objects and materials. While, in the beginning, his practice was characterized by entering abandoned buildings, gathering materials, taking them to his studio or someplace else, and then assembling them, he later shifted to working with the materials he would find on site – often trespassing to enter the buildings, including the Michigan Central Station, the Packard Plant, and Fisher Body 21. Scott himself described his mode of practice as “a collaboration that happens with the site, the history, the materials, everything” (interview with Scott Hocking, May 2017, Detroit). I will illustrate this in the following with an example of his work: over the course of 8 months, Scott built the installation *Ziggurat and Fisher Body 21 (2007–2009)* with 6201 wooden floor blocks inside the abandoned Fisher Body 21 (for photographs of the installation as well as the plant, see Hocking, 2020). When Fisher Body 21 was still a body-stamping press, the wooden floor blocks were used as shock absorbers. But they lost their purpose when the plant was finally abandoned almost 20 years ago. Beginning in 2007, Scott assembled the blocks into a pyramid form that has “since been destroyed and returned to the pile of rubble from which it came” (Carducci, 2014: para. 9). The wooden floor blocks, Scott (Hocking, 2021) writes in an Instagram post on the 13th anniversary of photographing the finished ziggurat that were “a staple of so many cast concrete factories from those days, were impregnated with creosote ... and therefore were/are considered a carcinogen”. The creosote was used as it protects the wood from damage. So, the wood and creosote together not only created a resistant surface on which heavy machinery could be used but also created an environment that was potentially harmful for the

workers’ health. The toxicity of this fusion outlived the abandonment of the plant; although Fisher Body 21 was “stripped clean by scrappers” (Hocking, 2020), the floor blocks remained there. The vitality of the creosote and its powerful ramifications are immediately connected to the premature end of other beings. Whether this was an act with reckless disregard for the workers or if the creosote’s carcinogen effect was not known at the time, however, remains unclear. Writing about the toxicity of the floor blocks, even though almost casually, Scott acknowledges the historical context and the shifting perception of the material (Barrett, 2020:370).

Although this sculpture was destroyed by the Environmental Protection Agency while they cleaned out hazardous materials (Hocking, 2020), the destruction of Scott’s sculptures is unexceptional. Rather, it is Scott’s distinct understanding of “nature” that lies behind the construction and deconstruction of his work. He describes nature as “always just going through this cycle of death and rebirth and life and death and rebirth. I think there is something beautiful in that transition and I think there’s something that should be embraced in that transition” (interview with Scott Hocking, May 2017, Detroit). While the sculpture itself eventually dissolved, it was preserved through another medium because Scott photo-documents his work. But it is more than an attempt at preservation. According to Crang (2012:61), the photograph “plays upon time and allows the play of time to become apparent”. While Scott’s photographs of the ziggurat on the one hand fixate the sculpture in place and time through the capture, on the other hand, they remind us of the flows of time, place, and materials as they show something that no longer exists in this shape (Crang, 2012:61).

Scott creates with as well as inside something that is no longer there, at least according to its once conceptualized space: Fisher Body 21 lost its original purpose when the plant was closed, but material remnants and its history still exist. With the ziggurat, instead of mourning it, Scott embraces – if not even celebrates – the constant transitions, fluxes, and changes that places are in. Further, where others see trash or blight, Scott finds viability as well as beauty, solace, and inspiration (interview with Scott Hocking, May 2017, Detroit), even when it involves trespassing and working with hazardous materials.

## 6 Discussion

Not only are the materials and ruins that collaborate with the artists left behind, but they are also residues of the past. They are active participants in the creation of a “temporal disorder” (Edensor, 2008:137) in the sense that they still exist, even if just as fragments, but their context has vanished or changed: the floor blocks are no longer absorbing shocks; the mirrors are no longer hanging on someone’s wall. The materials can be described, using Edensor’s (2005b:319) words, as “tran-

sient, so that they are in a state of becoming something else or almost nothing that is separately identifiable”.

In this interweaving and interaction of artistic practices, materiality, and space, they dynamically and relationally produce each other and create meanings. This approach opens room for a nondeterministic perspective on space and its history, present, and future, without denying the structural inequalities and power relations that shape space and time. Rather, it is a change in perspective where artists like Scott find beauty, opportunity, and excitement in the discarded and the ruined: “What I love about places like Detroit is that I like the unpredictability, I like that there’s elements of the unknown, I like that not everything is figured out. I like living in a place where there’s some wildness to it” (interview with Scott Hocking, May 2017, Detroit). At the same time, though, this “wildness” also gives him solace and a temporary “escape into a different reality” (Hocking, 2018:42). While Scott uses similar words as media and others have for describing Detroit as a blank slate, wild frontier, or urban prairie – which are not only myths but also highly problematic (Fraser, 2018; Safransky, 2014; Hackworth, 2019; Kinney, 2016; Draus et al., 2010) – he does not use them to describe a place that needs settlement or aid but one that offers him inspiration. The unpredictability, the unknown, and the wildness that Scott describes are partially grounded in what Edensor (2005a:108) describes as the ambiguous status of objects inside ruins that “possess an intermediate quality which renders them ripe for reappropriation. They are excess matter which has not been disposed and therefore not consigned to fixity through annulment”. Here, matter resists the static narratives and fixed definitions of Detroit. Without fetishizing vacancy or emptiness, matter inspires and shows potentiality through its unfixed meanings (Jain and Roy, 2022:435).

In this ambiguity, the conception of ruins as only spaces of absence, deficiency, and worthlessness is broken down and their “evocative potential” (de Solà-Morales Rubió, 1995:120) and the vitality of their matter are considered, too. Herscher (2012:8) uses the term “unreal estate” to refer to “urban territory that has fallen out of the literal economy, the economy of the market, and thereby become available to different systems of value, whether cultural, social, political or otherwise”. Edensor (2005b:317) identifies a similar ambiguity where ruins “seem to have lost any value they may once have possessed but simultaneously, by virtue of their present neglect and disorderly situation, there are no sanctions on how they might be used or interpreted”. However, while Edensor ascribes a central power to humans here, a new materialist reading would focus more strongly on the agency of the material and acknowledge that “waste itself intervenes in multifarious ways in our everyday life” (Jain and Roy, 2022:453) and, returning to art, that “trash has its own vitality, it serves as a shared partner in the creative act of conception, making, and encountering of art” (Jain and Roy, 2022:453).

This lens not only allows us to look at ruins and materials beyond their economic exploitability but also urges us to consider the capitalist surplus production and processes of marginalization in deindustrialized spaces as structural forces behind it (High, 2013). The overaccumulation of buildings together with the historical developments described above created an economic devaluation which in turn led to abandonment, ruination, and demolition (Harvey, 1982:192). It is therefore important to acknowledge that this is not something that just happens but that industrial ruins and waste are actively and knowingly produced (Armiero, 2021). It is the consequence of the “capitalist quest for profit maximization” (Edensor, 2005b:313) that is “rendering places, labour, technological processes, products and machines instantaneously outdated” (Edensor, 2005b:315), thereby denying the agency of the myriad actors involved. Through their workings with materials that are part of this historical context and developments, the installations can act as reminders of them, not least through the irritations they might create.

The historical context of Detroit gave rise to the specific material conditions discussed here, the physical objects such as the rusted iron or the wooden floor blocks as well as their discursive framings as significant and valuable or as waste and ruins. In this entanglement, however, they are not passive products but active forces in the production of art and the production of space. This becomes apparent when taking a final look at the ziggurat. Edensor (2005b:327), writing about objects in ruins, states that they all “mingle and there are no distinctions between the seemingly trivial and the important. There is similarly no order which shapes how things ought to be consecutively viewed, no pattern or system through which preferred understandings might build up”. However, this mingling does not apply anymore once artists like Scott build large installations inside a ruin. To the first layer of unfamiliarity that emerges because of the abandonment and ruination itself, the installation adds a second layer of unfamiliarity. Objects then mingle differently; they are ordered and created to be viewed in another way. But they also resist in their particular ways: the floor blocks as they were encountered by Scott are in a solid, unyielding shape that allows for certain orderings and inhibits others. It is their material agency that shows its effectiveness here (Lehmann, 2009:44).

Oftentimes, the exchange value of buildings, materials, and objects has crumbled or even completely vanished, and ruins may even be “assigned as useless space” (Edensor, 2005a:108). As DeSilvey and Edensor (2013:476) point out, however, “the absence of any ordering imperative allows for a more unscripted and loose engagement with space and materiality. Emergent sensual, material and aesthetic qualities reveal the inherent vitalism of all matter”, and, at the same time, the “ability to expose hidden injuries of class, global economic inequities, and other unjust effects of capital flows and sedimentations” (Bennett, 2004:366–367) lies in the ma-



terial. It is the “material as information carrier” (Barrett, 2020:364) but as the carrier of not a singular but multiple stories and symbols. Then, “the consideration of trash’s physical attributes and their symbolic relation to various historical entities and experiences becomes essential in determining the meaning ascribed in metaphoric/symbolic artworks” (Jain and Roy, 2022:433). By paying attention to the material agency, the installations discussed here might lead us back to the shop floors; to the tools, machines, and humans that worked with them before; to the places they were extracted from; and to the many assemblages that the materials were grouping with prior to the artworks. Through this reading, there is a shift from one particular reading of an installation to a multiplicity of potential meanings (Leonard, 2020:22).

## 7 Conclusions

For decades, abandoned buildings, ruins, vacant lots, and illicit trash dumps have been part of people’s everyday lives in Detroit. Although they might have lost their initial purpose, they still exist in the present and might be perceived by some as relics of the past. To some artists, they are more than odds and ends. As Scott depicts in the quote at the beginning of this paper, they are the material prerequisites and inspirations for as well as collaborators in his artistic practice. Buildings and lots become the sites for artistic practices and exhibitions where discarded materials and objects are (parts of) artworks. These practices engage and communicate with space and materials in the way that they often work *with*, not just *in*, a site. Further, highlighting the material aspect of these practices “has the capacity to uncover and illuminate social practices, hidden histories and new tactile encounters” (Barrett, 2020:370). When Dabls narrates that people “had an emotional experience” (interview with Olayami Dabls, May 2017, Detroit) with how he arranged things, he gives one answer to the question of what art can do and what it can set in motion (Hawkins, 2014:10). It also enables us to regard the sculptures discussed here not as finished products but as relational material–semiotic works in progress that are always becoming. Not only the artists but also the viewers then become part of the assemblage here known as the installation as they engage in sensory relations with the materials and derive meaning from these entanglements.

In this paper, I have set out to explore the potential insights of a new materialist approach to the empirical data from my dissertation project which focused on the interplay between art and space in Detroit. New materialism challenges the conventional belief that artists mold materials to craft a piece of art; rather, it emphasizes the active role of materials and their collaboration as co-participants in the artistic process (Jain and Roy, 2022:430). Thinking with new materialism, my focus shifted from the artists as sovereign meaning makers and sole creators to the materials as well as the relations of those involved in the process of creating and being an installation.

By this decentering of the human, I paid even closer attention to the material and discursive dimensions of the artworks as well as their entanglements (Dolphijn and Tuin, 2012:91). While, in my prior research, I focused much more on the artist, their artistic practice, and their meaning making, I now learned about the profound and diverse relations between humans and non-humans in the creation of an artwork which Jain and Roy (2022:453) describe “as a complex mind-matter process”. The new materialist approach also opened many paths that I could think about and pursue further such as the labor conditions in the factories and mines or the ways a capitalist society deals with (its own) waste and the things, beliefs, and concepts that have been rendered obsolete. However, and this brings me to the limitations that this approach entailed for me, I could not follow all these paths. In other words, I tried to follow some materials to their prior entanglements, but this had its limits as well as I cannot follow them all – especially considering that this might pose a rather endless endeavor. Still, I wonder how I could have deepened these paths, which I have only now begun to think about more deeply. I assume that I would have benefited from more or more focused field research. Does this mean entering vacant buildings and observing and documenting on site? At the same time, Scott’s installations, for example, have long been gone. Or could collaborations with material scientists or others help to better understand the materials and their agency? What could be gained from these collaborations? Another important point for me here is that although I have tried to decenter the human, I have frequently come up against the limits of this which is probably also due to my empirical basis. And after all, it is now me who is writing this text; who has tried to engage with the materials; but who nevertheless decides at this point what I find worth mentioning, what I find worth discussing. I do not see an easy way out of this, and perhaps it is less a problem than something that must always be kept in mind in a reflexive and situated research practice.

While I have begun to explore the entanglements of artistic practices, space, and materiality in this paper, there is more analysis needed to investigate more deeply how approaches from new materialism can be beneficial for geographic studies on the production of art. Especially regarding the methodical approach, I still see potential for discussion. While, besides observations, I mainly used text-based forms of research, it would be worth thinking about which other methodical approaches, visual, tactile, and other, would allow for an even stronger engagement with materiality. And this is not only limited to the process of research but also involves thinking about the ways we communicate research with more than words.

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