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The Vital Ambiguity of Surface: Culturally Determined Notions of Metaphor and Performance in Contemporary Building Material

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The Vital Ambiguity of Surface:
Culturally Determined Notions of Metaphor and Performance
in Contemporary Building Material

by
Christopher Thomas Campbell

A Thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts At Washington University in St. Louis
In partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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Washington University  St. Louis Graduate School of Art
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Abstract

This thesis investigates the systems and information decipherable within a material surface; more specifically, those ideas of value, performance, and function we may infer from the surface of contemporary building materials. When these materials are reduced to their flattened image, the cosmetic facade of a surface has the capacity to inform as well as deceive. Additionally, we may see in materials outward properties, such as color or tactility, the capacity for metaphor and the application of a symbolic personhood. This thesis seeks to comprehend the ways in which these expectations become fodder for complication and paradox, and promote a perceptual mutability.

Christopher Thomas Campbell, 2016
For M.T.S.
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Introduction

On a material surface we read and decipher codes, both literal and figurative. Information pertaining to tactility, application, value, and performance are embedded within the image of the material. By virtue of this content, the cosmetic facade of a surface has the capacity to inform as well as deceive. For example, a material produced through industrial methods often poses, as mask or illusion, an unfaithful veneer. There is an allegiance in these treatments to social constructs of value (amongst other things) As materials are reduced to their flattened image, they call to consciousness our will to access objects solely through visual data. Often there exists little continuity amongst what is seen and what is contained within: a dialogue between surface and content that can be as humorous as it is nefarious. As a result, expectations of all kinds become fodder for complication and paradox.

The body of work that accompanies this written thesis acknowledges and responds to these observations in presentation and performance mutability, servicing an honest, humorous, and inevitably paradoxical reconfiguration of engendered expectations. Playful approaches to form and physics seek to illustrate unexpected aptitudes, and ultimately promote an interpretive multiplicity. Diagrammatic similarities to generic and omnipresent objects tend to favor mimicry over simulation; behavior over appearance. The detachment from notions of simulacrum, instead, invites the unpacking of a more complex narrative underpinning. In the work components of image, form, function, and value are isolated, dismantled, and reconfigured. These moves allow formal syntax to become the tool of revelation.
Indications of subversion, function less as judgment that pertain to use or value, and more as open observations located within social expectations of gender normalcy. Color and form are implemented for their capacity to promote gender mutability, and disrupt binary constructs around the subject. Additionally, by unifying the socially gendered connotations of tactile “softness” and “hardness” in an inseparable fashion, the work avoids categorization via its mutability. The composed tensions exploit both the imbedded social content of materiality through observable physical properties, and the themes of use or performative function.

As companion and complement, the following two essays seek to set up a context in which to consider the various modes of inquiry and interpretation offered by the work; their function being expansive over reductive. Their form, that of the case-study, is meant to isolate a single instance that, in its comprehension, could be applied to multiple instances in the work. There are no revelatory solutions to be deciphered by either the work or the writing, but the hope is, through the thoughtful application of the essay’s premises and an acute look at the physical work, one could consider the complex (and often contradictory) relationship between notions of material, image, value, and gender.
The Presence and Value of a Veneer:

Brick as Casestudy

**facade** | foʊˈsæd | (also façade)
noun
the face of a building, esp. the principal front that looks onto a street or open space.
• figurative an outward appearance that is maintained to conceal a less pleasant or creditable reality: *her flawless public facade masked private despair.*

**ORIGIN** mid 17th cent.: from French façade, from face

**veneer** | vəˈni(ə)r |
noun
a thin decorative covering of fine wood applied to a coarser wood or other material.
• a layer of wood used to make plywood.
• [in sing.] an attractive appearance that covers or disguises someone or something’s true nature or feelings: *her veneer of composure cracked a little.*

The material objects we build with find their size and proportion in relationship to the body, if not an ergonomic obligation, then through their use in spatial articulation designed for human occupation. A brick fits in the hand of its layer, and the average 2x4, at 96 inches in length, both defines and is in response to a concept of domestic space. The brick, as well, has a particular mass that is in service of it being handled and maneuvered in great numbers. The variables that define a brick’s physical qualities are intimate ones; the sys-
tems of influence range from human comfort at both the micro and macro scale, to a specific terroir expounded by its color and texture.

The language we use to describe the object known as a “brick” influences the way we might perceive its part-to-whole relationship, or rather its unit-to-construct dynamic. If we observe a building and notice its construction, we might say that it is a “brick building”; describing both the individual object and its collective aggregation. As an affect, it is challenging to separate our sense of the single object from its structural application.

The brick contains two forms of potentiality; its union with the hand and its association with others like it. By having knowledge of the single brick (its weight, size, and tactility), we make assumptions about collective presence. We look at the undulating relief of terra cotta that constitutes the wall’s surface and project upon it, all the characteristics of the single unit. We trust that, just behind the surface, is the mass and strength of the brick; the qualities we use to attach value to the material object.

When we look at a brick wall, we are observing a single facet of each unit. We complete each brick’s volume in our mind’s eye. The characteristics we observe as planar propose a spatial affect. We trust the skin and the body to be one and the same, cohesive and whole. In its image, or face, we find a complete concept of what it is or should be. This what a façade conveys: ideas of substantiality and integrity born out of a veneer. A wall of bricks follows the “law of common fate” (a group of objects seen as a unit). This happens not just in its visual phenomenon of part-to-whole, but in all the qualities we perceive about the discrete unit: The individual brick is robust, so too must be the façade.

No matter what a façade is truly constructed from, we assess its ability to enclose space and protect from weather all the same. We use brick for its connotations and assumed performance. That said, the value of the brick façade is reliant upon our concept of the individual unit and our ability to complete the image of an object through the perception of a single face. The potential for all this to occur under a guise is obvious when one considers the faith we tend to put in surface.

A brick veneer, the image of a brick’s skin adhered to an otherwise unbrick-like body, evokes a series of paradoxical phenomena that feed the previously mentioned implications of image and value. A brick veneer is fascinating for the way it application is limited by its obligation to portray something it is not; the veneer is only convincing when its lie conforms to the intended use of the material it depicts. When exist-
ing only as veil or image, the veneer begins to separate out the variables of form, function, and appearance. Although, in some capacity the brick veneer embodies all the properties of the real brick, it does so in a limited and reduced volume: The veneer displays the image of the brick, but only in a single facet, it performs the function of weather retardant while neglecting all other functions, and its form exists as a minimal sliver of its referent. In this, we cannot perceive the individual “unit” that comprises the whole. Rather, the veneer only physically exists collectively, in the way it creates surface.

A brick veneer cloaks the transfer of the functions, previously embodied by the actual brick, to other components of the construction. This is not an uncommon occurrence in building practice, the existence of a curtain wall, but becomes an anomaly by the way in which it portrays its physical abilities on its surface deceptively, through image. We may be convinced of a façade’s load-bearing potential, but this is ultimately only through the concepts of ocular value we have attached to the image of the material object. A brick veneer is an ideal illusion, playing to our assumptions and capitalizing on our systems of value.

Applying the image of a material to a façade that is not composed of said material is not necessarily an ethical dilemma. When something is performing its intended function, variables of aesthetics may or may not relate. One way, instead, is to question the relationship of skin to body. We see in a brick, a fluid and consistent dialogue between appearance and functional capacity. The brick contains within it the potentiality of patina. As old skin wears away, new skin is just below the surface; an existence as un-static as any living creature. In the realm of veneer, this phenomenon is immune to replication; death of the skin is the death of the illusion.

Less continuity exists in the skin-to-body dynamic of a brick veneer. As elements of function, such as load and thermodynamics, are transferred to other materials, a “sandwich” aesthetic results. If there exists a unit it is at the scale and proportion of the sheet, not the ergonomic object (responding to the body and space, rather than hand and comfort). Additionally, a sandwich implies two skins or, rather, two distinct facets to the mass. Neither face is necessarily obligated to communicate anything about the other, or anything about the poche. With elements of function relegated to separate units, each piece performs in the way it wishes, whether that be compression strength, beauty, durability, etc. Yet, it is still the brick veneer, the image of a continuous brick surface, which communicates (faithfully or not) all the abilities of the “sandwich”. Whether a brick façade exists as a veneer or not,
it is ultimately reliant upon its surface image as messenger of utility.

Two variations are produced in the use of a brick veneer; one being the molded surface with an applied image, and the other being a thin sliver of the actual material palette. Both of these essentially function as shallow-relief wallpaper. The difference becomes the material used to create the illusion. The significance of this may only be found in assessing the ability to deceive, or rather convince. After all, each remains a veil isolated from its original capacities and reduced to its presence as an image.

Questions of perception become less clear when considering quality and proximity of a brick veneer; there is great potential for a viewing experience to enter the realm of the uncanny. The unsettling feeling of deception may be triggered by any number of unresolved veneer details, but most commonly arises from a realization that there is a clear distinction between skin and body. In the seams and corner details of a façade, honesty prevails. But what is most curious about this phenomenon is the infrequency by which our distrust in appearance triggers distrust in its function. We may still believe that the portrayal of brick is more valuable than something unfamiliar. A veneer could take on nearly any appearance; the system in which it operates implies endless mutability. Yet, too often, we prefer the imitation of the familiar to a faithful embodiment of a material condition.

Ultimately the question that arises is, does it matter? If, as a system, the necessary functions are being performed and a veneer embodies the appearance of the material that we value, what produces the verdict on value (brick over veneer)? Is there an argument for the preoccupation with invisible integrity?

It might be said that our preoccupations with the “real” have nearly nothing to do with appearance or function, but rather with the various implications that artificiality has on the systems in which these materials operate; specifically, the notions of sustainability, the environmental impact of artificial materials, etc. When a veneer adopts the image of an existing material, it provokes a kind of comparison. An actual brick and a piece of brick veneer may have nothing in common other than their appearance on a single facet, but by virtue of this shared image we set up parallel expectations. If, for example, a separate veneer made of the same artificial material as a brick-veneer adopted abstract/geometric imagery, expectations and assumptions would likely differ. A shift in social supposition is virtually impossible when our materials convey the appearance of those with already understood properties.
Concerning the subject of honesty, the veneer is more commonly a reflection on the morality of the viewer than of the object/surface. The veneer may contain, on its surface, the image of a brick. But its, convincing, or comforting, nature is only the product of one’s willingness to project the capacities of the actual brick onto an image of one; the deceptions are internally constructed rather than outwardly projected. One secondary definition (or attribute) of the word honest is, “fairly earned”. If the brick veneer only performs a portion of the actual bricks function, maybe it is “fair” that its physical attributes only constitute a portion of the actual. In that sense, the relevance of any moral imperative can be attributed to one’s willingness to acknowledge this relationship.

The brick may be seen as a case study for the assessment of various material objects and the value we extract from their surface-appearance. Though comprised of natural material, its form, proportion, and function are prescribed by the systems in which it operates. Many of our perceived values are similarly constructed and therefore open to adaptation. The extraction of the bricks image in service of re-application is a model of deconstruction/reconstruction that is increasingly prevalent, and fodder for the reconsideration of our material systems. In service of art making, there is potential to follow these conclusions to an illogical end or highlight the series of complex and paradoxical systems that envelop a simple material object.
Material, Gender, and Metaphor in Building Practice:

Owens-Corning’s “Foamular” as Casestudy

Contemporary building materials, as well as their methods of production, are made less for durability and longevity than in service of reducing weight and bulkiness. Besides the evolved “softening” and “lightening” of materials, contemporary methods of production/construction have greatly reduced the need for exceptional physical drudgery and rugged resilience, previously seen as essential attributes. This has a number of implications within the systems that these materials operate. Most importantly, this complicates the relationship between the long-held attributes of masculinity and those of materials physical properties. If the gender specific stereotype of brutishness is no longer perpetuated by the necessity of physical demands, the preservation of the masculine image inside of building practice is contradictory and disingenuous. Ultimately, what is most interesting and complicated about this phenomenon is the way in which the notions of masculinity come in contact, or rather conflict, with contemporary building materials and contemporary building practices; the tension produced functioning as the metaphorical substance of various gender-based hostilities.

Building practices have long been associated with notions of masculinity. These associations commonly carry negative connotations; attitudes of aggression attached to ideas of power and strength. Despite its generalizing nature, this observation is rooted in a number of objective variables: Proportionately, males represent the greater number of those who participate in the physical labor or construction (In the
US, 9% are women). The physical properties of material used in building practice have, until recently, required significant physical aptitude (this has no inherent implications of discrimination, necessarily, but rather perpetuates perceived notions of “necessary” masculinity and toughness): regulated by physical ability, and of labor over rumination. What may be deemed most significant about this dynamic is the ways in which particular materiality contributed to and preserved our notions of the overt masculinity inside of building practices, and how contemporary circumstances may actually offer an instance of unprecedented mutability.

To use one material as a case study, the presence of foam (specifically, Owens-Corning PINK Foamular) and the diversity of its application, epitomize material progression as it relates to misplaced masculine stereotypes. The material's capacity to adapt to nearly any form and except nearly any additive surface, produce a phenomenon of near over-use; applications ranging from façade construction to faux concrete signage. In the realm of building material systems, foam has become the body to nearly any skin. Its variability and lightness differ so dramatically from what it inevitably portrays; a poignant metaphor for the contemporary masculinity/materiality dynamic in building practices.

It should not be understated that the predominance of artificial material has affected the presence of artificial color. Without materials having an inherent surface color or appearance, the palette of construction has shifted towards the realm of the pastel. Early versions of this phenomenon were the product of branding; companies attempting to associate a particular color with their product (This was particularly the case for the PINK of Foamular). The presence of pink carries, as well, a number of stereotypical gender implications. Seen as having a predominantly feminine connotations, pink, in the realm of building practice represents a collision of gender specific stereotypes. The intersection, rather then perpetuating gender specific notions, convolutes and challenges such generalizations.

Owens-Corning's PINK Foamular as Casestudy

As a case study, “Owens-Corning's Foamular” pink insulation foam epitomizes a number of the noted observations: its nearly organ-like lavender-pink tone, its innumerable applications and adapted usages, and its feather-like yield to gravity, to name a few. By no coincidence, the pop culture icon,
The Pink Panther, figures prominently upon its face. The cartoon symbol is present in every one of the company’s products that don its unmistakable organ-like pigment. The “cat” exists, perfectly, in the same paradoxical realm as the material itself.

The Pink Panther is about anthropomorphic as he is zoomorphic. His sexuality is most certainly never downplayed when seen in animated action; rarely detached from a martini and moving with the gracefulness of a classically trained ballet dancer. Yet this cat, an animal stereotypically associated with femininity, is here presented as male. Donned in a bright pink coat, his form and presence lands in the realm of androgyny with a paradoxically heightened sexuality. As a “super-power”, The Pink Panther can enter into a state of deep camouflage should his context afford him the level of pink saturation necessary, leaving only his eyes as his visible feature. This transformation functions as a potent metaphor for the character’s gender and species mutability. As Barbara Nemitz notes in her essay, “Pink-The Exposed Color”,

“Pink is the color of the fantastic. Boundaries are crossed. Pink animals become less animal-like… That is certainly true of the “Pink Panther”. The typical example is a cartoon figure. The animated cartoon is a genre in which the impossible becomes possible. Pink represents emancipation from the burdens of reality and traditional norms.”

The Pink Panther’s image is woven into a sea of information adorning the large flat face of the “Foamular” material; facts pertaining to the efficiency, density, thickness, copyrights, etc. At once, the material displays all its tactile and visual qualities via its image, while simultaneously, through language and symbol, describing those same qualities. This information is mostly found in the plane of the material, but along its edge is an embossed number, “250”, delineating the material’s density. This number also contains the potential for a dual read. Although “250” pertains to the foam’s particular material qualities, it has another meaning outside of western culture. “250” (二百五 pinyin èrbǎiwǔ) in the Mandarin language, when used in the right context, means explicitly, “stupid person” or “simpleton”; coincidentally one may see a correlation between the additional meaning of the word “dense” in English (thick or stupid), and the Mandarin slang application of the number 250 as an insult toward intelligence. The point being, through language, even the most mundane

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Language performs a complicating role in the interpretation of this material, but the unmistakable hue of its surface has an equally rich set of implications. The particular color of the material was first used in 1956 as a way to differentiate Owens-Corning’s insulation from its competitors. The color was the product of adding red dye to its existing tan material; changing the material from a Caucasian flesh-tone to that of one’s internal organs. As the company and its relationship to the color evolved, Owens-Corning adopted the Pink Panther as its mascot (1980), and eventually acquired the trademark for the particular color itself, known in all caps as PINK (1985). The nature of this ownership is most relevant when seen in the context of its advertising strategies; specifically, its Superbowl commercial of 1979. Though, in order to discuss the relevance of the materials color as pertains to gender, a brief summary of its cultural connotations is necessary.

An Aside About the Color Pink as it Pertains to Gender

Certain assumptions can be made about the way a color will impact our impression of a material. Color carries gender implications due to cultural tradition, perpetuated stereotypes or its contemporary cultural presence. The specific assumptions one may make about a color’s impact on a material’s gender implications are reliant upon a comprehension of the gender-based stereotypes surrounding the color. This, for better or worse, could be considered most potent with reference to the color pink.

Making an argument for the impact of the color pink as it is used in building practice, extensive quotations from research about the color will be used here. The color pink produces such extreme, particular, and contradictory responses in the human psyche. Therefore it seems significant to reference the preexisting writing and research around the subject.

Pink has historically had a polarizing effect on gender. That is to say, whether associated with the male or female, the color provokes certain connotations. As Barbara Nemitz states in her opening essay for the book, *Pink: The Exposed Color in Contemporary Art and Culture,*

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“The scale of social attitudes toward pink runs to extremes. People seem to know exactly where pink belongs and where it doesn’t. Remarkably, genders respond differently to pink. Women tend to find pink quite interesting, while very few men wish to have anything to do with the color. Most men reject pink categorically.”

Nemitz is referencing a contemporary survey of nearly 2000 men and women about their particular feelings towards the color. This data does nothing to challenge stereotypes, put forward progressive notions about gender, or battle negative connotations around gender mutability. But what it does do, is represent a tangible realization of the specific visceral response to the color at hand. The objective collection of this data also, does not embody a progressive objective; rather, it provides insight into the contemporary social connotations that we ascribe to pink. The implications of such stereotypes can function as a sort of cultural currency, to be worked with or against.

It is relevant to note that the specific research being references earlier is tied to western-centric notions of the color pink. As Nemitz states later in her essay, “worth noting is that Japanese people tend to associate this rather delicate color with masculine themes”.7 To highlight this contradiction is to acknowledge the complex and contradictory ways that the color may be interpreted. This does not negate its polarization effect, but rather highlights the way that the color can function metaphorically, and paradoxically, with great impact.

When we think of the ways pink is attached, literally and figuratively, to notions of gender and the body, clothing is the medium of greatest effect. The body, when adorned in the color, activates a series of deeply rooted cultural connotations. As Nemitz notes,

“Today and in the recent past, pink has been worn primarily by girls and women. Despite all the progress made towards emancipation, rarely is the color found in the clothing of men and boys…. Color and material allude to qualities girls and women are expected to embody: sensitivity, gentleness, friendliness, and eroticism. It is generally recognized today that external appearance influences internal behavior”8

To be clear, Nemitz is addressing specific stereotypes attached to clothing and the color pink; stereotypes that, in a con-

6 Nemitz, 27.
7 Ibid, 28.
8 Ibid, 34.
temporary context, may be acknowledged or dismissed. But despite one’s allegiance, the adjectives adhered to such garments become fodder for exploitation or contradiction. Also, it is in clothing that the color becomes directly associated with a set of material qualities. When fabric is pink, a metaphorical congruency arises; connotations of “sensitivity” and “gentleness” find themselves materially manifested.9

Pink clothing acts as sign or symbol. The message it communicates is contingent upon the gender of the wearer. The “positive” or “negative” associations it makes often deal with intentionality. In this way, pink has the power to provoke, subvert, seduce, or reduce. Nemitz notes its particular abilities when on the male form by saying, “It has become a color that demonstrates difference. Pink also enables those who wear it to set themselves apart from conventional male image”.10 Clothing is a veneer; it covers the body and communicates a range of information about whom it adorns. But pink clothing, as in no other color, copes with the most extreme set of gender specific connotations and stereotypes.

Finally, when speaking about the gender-specific connotations of the color pink, one must consider the biological associations as it pertains to the human body. This is where pink finds its strongest symbolic relationship to sexuality. The subject is covered extensively in Karl Schawelka’s essay, “Showing Pink—Biological Aspects of the Color Pink”. In his essay Karl notes, “even though the color pink no longer triggers fixed sequences of instinctive behavior, one cannot help but notice how firmly entrenched pink is in the field of meaning that revolves around the processes of fertility and procreation”.11 Pink’s currency, as it relates to the body, resides in the realm of symbol and metaphor; attaching the color to the specific organs of the female genitalia drives the deepest associations with human sexuality. To be clear, we have evolved away from the realm of pink as “stimulus for instinctive behavior”, like that of other primates, and into a more nuanced use of the color.12

The color’s gender associations, as they relate to the body, are specifically anatomic. We can speak universally of the body’s “openings and orifices”, with no particular allegiance to any one gender. But, it is seemingly more common to find female-centric associations. Schawelka describes this phenomenon in his essay by stating:

9  Nemitz, 34.
10 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 44.
We are familiar... with the phrase, “pink parts”, as a euphemistic reference to genitals. Engorging pink labia play an important role in pornographic contexts. The expression, “showing pink” is commonly found on the Internet with reference to nude photographs of female models exposing their genitals. Again here, the venerable symbolism of the rose is comparable in many cultures where the word, “rose,” also stands for female genitals.  

Unfortunately, what Schawelka fails to mention in his essay, is the way that these associations between color and female-genitalia are the direct product of a historically misogynistic control of language and symbolism. This is problematic in the sense of perpetuating stereotypes, but must still be considered for its relevance as a present and persisting cultural phenomenon.

When Louise Bourgeois said, “Pink is feminine. It represents a liking and acceptance of the self”, was she taking ownership of the color pink, or rather inverting a preexisting stereotype as a tool of empowerment? The quote is provocative for the way it invites the use of pink, in nearly any form, as a symbol of “acceptance”, while emancipating both the female gender and the color pink from stereotypical notions of fragility. But, even Louise Bourgeois saw the inseparable nature of the color pink and gender. The dynamic is not static, but exists as both historic and deeply contradictory. As a result, pink's gender-specific connotations are certainly mutable, but ultimately indivisible.

Additional Cultural Precedents: The Pink Ribbon and Breast Cancer Awareness

More direct use of the color pink as a tool to deliver a gender-specific message can be observed in the widespread breast cancer awareness messages of the last few decades. Most commonly, the particularly “healthy” shade of pink utilized in this effort takes the form of a ribbon, but as the campaign progressed through the 90’s the color itself became synonymous with the movement. In the context of breast cancer awareness, this color was being associated directly with the female anatomy and the health of the female body. It should come as no surprise that the bulk of the campaign efforts...

13 Ibid, 44.
were being made by big-name feminine product-based cosmetic brands. \textsuperscript{15}

In 1992, as there was a hard push towards breast cancer awareness, the editor of \textit{Self} magazine and the vice president of Estee Lauder began a collaboration to construct a memorable and provocative symbol for the movement. \textsuperscript{16} It was not uncommon at the time to see colored ribbons being used as symbolic reminders, making the most significant variable the ribbon's particular hue. The breast cancer awareness movement, through grassroots efforts, had already adopted a peach-toned ribbon as its logo. Estee Lauder was unable to negotiate with those groups already using the peach colored ribbon (in service of establishing ownership rights), so the company was required to find its own hue. It is unsurprising that the particular shade of pink was a Estee Lauder brand staple; one that they considered their best selling and most popular (“150-Pink”). \textsuperscript{17} Later adopted by Avon, the “150 Pink” hue was not only synonymous with femininity, but particularly with the brands toting feminine-specific products at the time. \textsuperscript{18}

The particular success of this color in the campaign for breast cancer awareness is attributed, by those directly involved, to its femininity. When asked about this hue of pink, Margaret Welch, Director of the Color Association of the United States, commented:

“Pink is the quintessential female color…. The profile on pink is playful, life-affirming. We have studies as to its calming effect, its quieting effect, its lessening of stress. [Pastel pink] is a shade known to be health giving; that’s why we have expressions like ‘in the pink’. You can’t say a bad thing about it.” \textsuperscript{19}

It its through this effort to promote awareness and health towards an issue affecting predominantly one gender, that we see how a color can become culturally indivisible from its gender connotations. This campaign allows pink to take on a presence of power that it might not otherwise possess. The success of the breast cancer awareness effort was contingent upon the potency of the culturally specific gender connotations around a color; a centuries old attachment of pink to notions of femininity.


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
Owens-Corning’s 1979 Superbowl Commercial

The venue for the commercial, the nature of its content, and the language/phrasing used in its dialogue are significant to the conversation around material and its gender implications. To briefly summarize the commercial, viewers are shown a glass house in which they can see all the ways in which Owens-Corning pink insulation is contributing to the efficiency of their home. Despite the house being glass, it appears completely pink as the sandwiched insulation occupies all surfaces. After moving through the home and observing its applications, the narrator suggests that one should, “Put your house in the pink” (a centuries old phrase with the potential for multiple interpretations).20

It may be most relevant to begin with the venue for the debut of this commercial; the pinnacle of testosterone fueled amusement, the Superbowl. In the realm of advertising, it may too be seen as the zenith of viewership. Whether it’s the single-gender participation in the game, propensity for physical violence, or cheer-squads of objectified females, the bias as it pertains to context for this commercial seems relevant. Additionally viewership of the game has remained predominantly male (despite a leveling trend in the few years of the 21st century). This gender specific bias is magnified when seen within the context of the commercial’s specific subject matter and use of language.

The commercial illustrates, by use of a glass model, the ways in which Owens-Corning’s product functions literally and figuratively as the internal workings, or guts, of a structure. Its color, coincidentally, mirrors that of our own insides. With its skin rendered transparent, the home becomes wholly enveloped in the color. Additionally, this effect is achieved via a model: analogous to a doll house in scale and level of detail. To be clear, this was a pink dollhouse-like structure being employed as an advertising tool during the Superbowl broadcast.

Possibly most important to the conversation around materiality and gender is the specific language used to characterize its usage in the commercial. As previously mentioned, the commercial’s parting words are “put your house in the pink”. The sexual connotations of such a statement require nearly no decryption. Although, it may be useful to refer to the previously mentioned figures of speech in Schawelka’s text: “pink parts, “showing pink”, etc.21 This statement by the nar-

20 “Owens-Corning Insulation Commercial 1979.”
21 Schawelka, 44.
rator seems to tie the specific building material to a gendered portion of the human anatomy, as well as provoke a metaphorical fornication in its use. As a commercial appearing on the Superbowl, one can’t help but consider the intentionality behind such advertising.

To be clear, insulation foam has no sex appeal. Despite the deepest and most powerful metaphors, it remains an inanimate product lacking the power to provoke such emotions. But, what this commercial does is begin to ascribe clear and specific notions of gender to a material that would otherwise not explicitly exude such qualities. The commercial gives the material a sort of personhood, or even a tactile connection to the body through its color and its use. It may have seemed like a common phenomenon to any Latin-based language speaker (attaching gender to an object), but for an American football audience this was not the case. The intentionality of the commercial may be debatable, but its language and context is charged with the kind of gender specific cultural references that complicate our understanding of its place in our everyday.

In Practice

In most cases with the use of foam, there is an act of concealment that follows its application, commonly in service of preservation, deception, or both. As with the clothing a person wears, the veneer tells a story of expectation via its cultural implications. The PINK of Owens-Corning’s foam is nearly always concealed, reducing its dialogue to that of the foam and the worker. The impact that this interaction between man and material has is debatable. But, as previously stated, the intermingling of a material that could be perceived as having stereotypically feminine qualities with a trade that is predominantly male, is a phenomenon that epitomizes the contemporary “expanded field of gender”. This collision functions as a metaphor for our more complex and evolving comprehension of the role of gender in contemporary culture. David Getsy might have best summarized the premise of such a notion in his book, Abstract Bodies, describing the pursuit of his study as, “how non-binary genders are articulated and acknowledged, how human morphologies could be valued for their mutability, and how to do justice to successive states of personhood or embodiment”.

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23 Ibid., preface xiv
This is not to suggest that these paired contradictions are a force for social progression. Rather, the observed complexity could be seen as a metaphorical parallel to our evolving comprehension of gender binaries. It is often the collision of stereotypes, the adoption of one group’s stereotype by another, that we see the germination of newer, or possibly more accurate, notions of gender. Objects and materials are not immune; color, tactility, form, and use all infer cultural biases. These meanings evolve as the systems in which they operate evolve, and ultimately serve to illustrate the complexities and contradictions of personhood.

Figure 22: A worker apply heat to form to produce the effect of stone: an appearance typically taking millennia and enormous amounts of pressure to produce in real stone, reduced to minutes by foam and a heat gun.
Notes on the Artwork and Conclusion

Notes on the Physical Work: Operations for Making (Form, Function, Image)

At the artworks inception, variables of form, function, and image were isolated in each component. As a conceptual tool, the application of this particular language permitted me to dissect the systems operating as information on, and within, each object. The variables, when isolated, could be reapplied, augmented, or displaced in service of affect. For myself, the work became an act of negotiated arrangements; formal invention being minimal when compared to the investment made in contextualization.

In form, we’re acclimated with a particular set of systems. To use the brick as an example, we see its ergonomic allegiance, a particular part-to-whole relationship, and all the implications of strength and longevity tied to a masonry unit. The concept of a brick is incomplete without it’s surface/image and a comprehension of its function, but its form begins to imply a dialogue with the body. Additionally, it speaks directly to the spatial variables of perception that contribute to our conception of an object. Unlike image, our perception of the form of an object, as noted by Robert Morris, is contingent upon our unconscious capacity to exercise spatial gestalt.

Function is the variable tied most directly to its systems of operation and use. Its perception is not ocular: its comprehension being the product of various cultural impressions. To be blunt, function tells us about the typical use of an object. Functions may range from sacred to mundane, but their subversion is the catalyst for contemplation. Form is so often
derivative of function in objects, that when isolated, their logic is compromised.

The image, as a wholly two-dimensional phenomenon, is the place that we derive, or imply, value. Image is different than surface; surface implies subtle variables of form, like texture. Image functions like a code or symbol, in the same vain as language. To use Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s definition of symbol, “It is the thing without being the thing, and yet the thing; an image composed in the mirror of the mind, and yet identical to the object.” In the image of an object we infer all the object’s physical attributes without the object being perceivable.

The description of this systematic breakdown is not meant to be pedantic. Rather, it serves to demonstrate the complexities found in the work and illustrate a way of operating as a maker. A shipping-palette’s worth of bricks made entirely from Owens-Corning PINK Foamular, provokes a number of questions: How do we perceive the function of an object that has certain implications via its form, but contradictory ones via its image? How are our assumptions about the object’s physical capabilities disrupted by a change in material? To what extent is honesty an essential attribute in the attempt to achieve faith and trust in an object? These questions do not have decisive answers, and in the case for this work, function more as a model of inquiry. The hope being that the viewer may relish the paradox present in the work, and see the ways it can function as translatable metaphor.

Notes on the Physical Work: Context and Quotation

As an art object, the work emits a level of consciousness about its place and precedents. Two particular contexts frame the work: the physical place at both the macro and micro scale (St. Louis/Kemper Museum), and the contemporary trajectory of painting and sculpture. The two contexts, and their accompanying systems, influenced form directly, while revealing latent content. This dialogue was cyclical, evolving until its final state.

In the realm of precedent, or rather, quotation, isolated instances of proportion, form, material, color, and content should strike a familiar chord. To make an explicit but non-inclusive list, one may notice a proportional relationship to the work of Donald Judd, An attitude about color and the content of visage akin to Philip Guston, the formal restraint and palette of Carl Andre, or a dialogue between head and

base diagrammatically reflective of Rodin. These quotations are obviously not literal; their function is often subversive. Recontextualizing these components changes their historic meaning, as well as their meaning within the context of this installation. Additionally, the act of material-inversion challenges the original intent of each precedent.

Location, at the scale of both building and city, inform formal gestures that site both work and viewer. At the most intimate scale, the grain, tone, and texture of the Kemper Museum’s floor finds its way directly into the sculpture. As a phenomenon of reflectivity, the entire museum’s context casts itself onto the surface of the work. At the macro scale, the formal gesture of the St. Louis arch is unmistakable present. As an omnipresent and overused symbol of the city, its presence occupies the paradox of both significance and invisibility. It is also worth mentioning the relevance of the brick to the city of St. Louis as a variable of sited content. Revered for their quality, St Louis bricks are sought after to the extent that entire buildings are dismantled in pursuit of their reuse across the country. As a result of such contemporary building devices as the brick veneer, the St Louis brick has reached an unprecedented status for such a democratic object.

Notes on the Physical Work: Anthropomorphic Phenomenon

The aforementioned notions of skin and body, organs and flesh, find their life in the work’s material relationships. Bodily metaphors occur in color, construction, and scale; some more literal than others. The Owens-Corning PINK foam, adorning most surfaces, has in it all the notions of gender and body via is color and tactility. For those surfaces with a painted pink, the chosen hue carries the title, “Gut”; a conscious choice by the Montana brand spray-paint to allude to human innards. As a method of construction in the sculptures, the PINK foam is sandwiched by a skin-like veneer, reinforcing this same allusion to ones insides. Some heights and proportions are unmistakably human, as is the subtle placement of shoelaces in a location reserved for our feet. It is not essential that the viewer be able to construct a complete image of the body; instead, one might consider the ways in which our preexisting systems contain in them the allusion or metaphor of ourselves.

To extend this notion, the elements of reflectivity demand direct participation. Agent-less heads adorn mirrored surfaces with cryptic coding; as viewer, passivity is not an option. Audience is literally and figuratively reflected in a cyclical fashion; the demand and desire to “comprehend” perpetuates
the perplexing notion of reflectivity. When we see ourselves in the work, we notice how the work is shaped by our perception of it…. And possibly, vice versa.

Conclusion

This writing does not seek to be an articulated and conclusive statement; the perceptual artifact is, hopefully, a perpetual set of questions. This is not to disorient the viewer, but rather to disrupt habits of mind and the unconscious ways we operate in and amongst system-based ecologies. The work’s nexus, the concept of *material-image*, demands a consideration of the dialogues within these systems. But, more importantly, as viewers we are asked to consider the ways in which these systems begin to “image” us. As the work highlights, both *viewer* and the *viewed* are inextricable bound to the codes and signifiers employed to quantify our surroundings. The work does not necessarily favor the ineffable, but rather encourages a consciousness about perceptual mutability and the potential for divergent readings in and amongst these systems.

![Figure 30: A detail from the work, “Faithful Veneer/ Average Density”](image)

![Figure 31: A detail from the work, “Faithful Veneer/ Average Density”](image)
Figure 32: A detail from the work, “Faithful Veneer/ Average Density”: agent-less heads and the two forms of the number “250”.
Bibliography


