1. Stitched into Material: On the Makeability of Shells

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…her life roared in her ear like an empty shell.
(Deborah Eisenberg, Under the 82nd Airborne)

In 1934, Dora Maar (1907–1997) created *Sans Titre*, also entitled *Hand-Shell* (fig. 1). It displays a photograph of a large nautilus shell out of which a mannequin's severed hand is crawling, as if it were a hermit crab. The nautilus lies on a sandy beach, but the composition has obviously been staged in an artist's studio. Its dramatic sky reinforces a sense of creation, even revelation. What exactly has been conceived here? Is it Maar's absurdist invention of a hand that seems to have been born from a mollusk? Is the elegant, plastic hand a reference to Maar's practice as a woman artist? Or is Maar musing about the hand as a reference to handicraft, in contrast to the shape of the nautilus, which is not made by hands but has grown organically?

Maar's photograph resonates with Paul Valéry's beautiful essay "The Man and the Sea Shell," written around the same time that Maar created her surrealist photographs. In this poetic essay, Valéry compares the way that human beings make things to the slow, continuous process by which nature fashions its forms. For Valéry, a shell is an enigma. The curiously ornamented object troubles him so much that he becomes almost obsessed with the question, "Who made this?" (117). Though it is one of nature's creations, a shell (such as Maar's nautilus) looks, Valéry writes, as if it had been *made for someone*. It appears as if some mind has chosen its patterns and colors. Shells seem to be disguised as artworks, tricking us to appear as if they have been made by the human hand—a quality that Maar keenly explores as well. A shell, like a work of art, is conspicuous for its total lack of utility, Valéry reasons. It is a hybrid entity comprising a union of contrary ideas "of order and fantasy, invention and necessity, law and exception" (112). By what sign, Valéry wonders, do we recognize that a given object "is or is not *made by a man*?" (118).

On the basis of Valéry's text and Maar's photograph, I argue that a shell is a fitting object with which we can rethink recent concerns raised in the debate on material culture studies regarding the confusion around the terms "material" and "materiality." In his essay "Materials against Materiality" (2007), Tim Ingold observes that

in discussions around materiality there is a lack of attention to actual materials. The slippage from material to materiality is a result of the rigid mind/matter separation or the gap between, as Ingold writes, "the tangible stuff of craftsmen and manufacturers" and "the abstract ruminations of philosophers and theorists" (2). The notion of "material" has largely been replaced by materiality, Ingold suggests, due to the ever-dominant subject/object divide that places human beings on one side and the world of objects on the other. This split reinforces the idea that material seems somehow locked up in things, considered not to be part of our lived environment.

Unlike what is generally assumed, it is not that people live in their houses "inside" the material world and are able to step away from it when going outdoors. We always are in touch with material surfaces, whether inside or outside our houses: there is always the earth under our feet and the air around us. We should not distinguish between what is material and what is not, Ingold argues, but rather we should differentiate between *different* materials. Materials touch. Objects and humans alike are surrounded not by a void but by other materials. Actually, Ingold writes, we should imagine humans to be moving *through* the material world like moles, carving out pathways *in* materials rather than building constructions *from* them. Arguing against the subject-object divide, he insists that there is no separation that would somehow situate humans on one side and materials on the other. Living as we do in an all-encompassing ecology, we are always in touch with stuff. We "swim in an ocean of materials," Ingold writes, poetically (7).

This beautiful metaphor seems to make a lot of sense. However, Ingold appears to apply his conception exclusively to raw materials such as earth, water, beeswax, or stone. At the beginning of the essay, he invites his reader to pick up a stone outside, get it wet and then observe how it changes when it dries. The exercise is meant to demonstrate that the stoniness of the stone is not part of the stone's nature but emerges from its interaction with its environment. The example of the stone indicates that Ingold is less interested in *our* interaction with *it*. Our involvement is limited to observation: we on the one side, the object on the other. The classic subject-object divide that he argues against is, in this particular instance, still firmly in place. He continues his line of argument in "Toward an Ecology of Materials," an essay written a few years later arguing that we should think not *about* materials but *from* them. This is a fascinating proposal, but he does not really explain how this works. He refers to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, arguing that humans are "stitched" into the fabric of the world as an integral part of matter's flow, but it remains unclear exactly how we are enveloped by materials as if having been woven into their texture. What remains equally unclear is how we should reflect on how we are in touch, how we might theorize that position.

I suggest that one particular term is missing from his general theory on materials (based on the list of concepts that he provides, 439): the artwork. In the classic *Art and Evidence: Writing on Art and Material Culture* (2001), Jules Prown lays out the

very first steps in the study of material culture, steps that have remained relevant up through today. Prown distinguishes among various categories of objects (of adornment, diversion, applied arts, devices and modification of the landscape), making a special case for works of art, which possess "considerable underlying theoretical complexity as opposed to technical or mechanical complexity" (87). It is precisely this kind of theoretical complexity that is needed to reflect on how humans and materials, and as a consequence body and surface, are knotted together.

Certain things such as art works are capable of inviting us to reflect on the nature of the "stitches" that have sewn us into the fabric of the world. The key issue here is touch. I suggest that only if we take touch into account can we start thinking *from* materials. And, to go one step further: if we start thinking from materials, we will see that mind and matter are not in fact opposed but are actually quite similar in formation. Thought, I argue, is not an abstract rumination, but is partly shaped by the things and materials with which it is concerned.

For the remainder of this essay, I will take the nautilus shell as the point of contact between a human individual and the "ocean of materials" that Ingold has in mind. It is a theoretically complex entity, which foregrounds its material even as it defies its materiality. Whereas feathers can be plucked from a bird, wool can be shorn from a sheep, and stone can be cut from rock, "shell" cannot quite be taken from a shell. It is hard to unlock the shell's materiality—the shell stubbornly remains, first and foremost, a material *thing*. A shell's properties (what is out there) and its qualities (what we ascribe to them) are intricately intertwined, much like the spiral form that constitutes its core.

Mimicking Ingold's experiment with the stone, I would like to ask the reader to pick up a shell from a beach and embrace it as a thing to think from. When you let it slowly move through your fingers, you will see that it is a perfect model for understanding the way humans are enveloped in the world of materials. You will almost automatically lift it to your nose to breathe in its scent or press it against your cheek for a moment so as to feel its wobbly surface. You may even stick out your tongue to taste its pearly, salty interior. Without much consideration, you will probably put it up against your ear. Valéry was fascinated by the set of automatic responses elicited by shells, which are distinct from those reactions prompted by other things such as stones. He describes these responses to the shell as instances of wonder. Every time we pick up a shell, it is as if we are seeing it for the first time. It awakens the oft-forgotten child in you, Valéry writes. As far back as antiquity, Cicero knew about the special effect that shells exert on human beings. In *The Orator* (46 BCE), he recommends that city officials who are worn out by worldly duties should start gathering shells on the beach, as it will, he claims, refresh their minds and free them from sorrow. He keenly observes that shell-gathering somehow allows grown-ups "to become boys again" (*repuerascere*, 213–15). For Cicero, shells have a healing effect as they generate, quite literally, a different mindset.

Fig. 2: The Dolls' House of Petronella Oortman, 1685–1710. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

The effect of shells on the body (through the senses) and the mind (through relief of what we would now call stress), undoubtedly played a role in the collective passion for shell collecting that emerged in seventeenth-century Netherlands. Trade with the West and East Indies made shells sought-after luxury commodities. The collective passion for shells was part of a larger fascination among Dutch merchants for exotica: rare, curious items that flowed into the harbor of Amsterdam from the colonized corners of the world. Most well-to-do households owned a curiosity cabinet, which would have contained a mixture of objects and artifacts including minerals, butterflies, coins, small sculptures, and shells. Shell collecting was a social pastime. Images produced in the Dutch Republic show men in conversation while interacting with shells and handing them to one another. Women, too, collected shells and placed them in so-called table cabinets; the assemblages of small shells gathered here would correspond to the larger, older shells their husbands owned. Miniaturization, it seems, was a pathway to collecting for women. Petronella Oortman's dolls' house (fig. 2), one such collection of curiosities, comprising banal household objects rendered in exactly the same fashion as their life-size models, contains a Japanese

lacquer cabinet filled with tiny shells, the baby versions of shell species.[1] Amid seven hundred handmade objects, these baby shells are the only items that have not been fabricated. We also see a female hand evident in the preservation of one of the largest collections of natural history items in the Netherlands, which was owned by the merchant Levinus Vincent (fig. 3). Open to the public, if one paid a small entrance fee, the collection attracted many visitors who could then admire the huge collection of shells laid out in colorful designs by Vincent's wife, Johanna van Breda, a gifted embroiderer known for her complicated patterns. Her skillful hands transformed shells into a kind of fabric, akin to decorative textiles.

Fig. 3: Johanna van Breda, Shell Arrangement, from Levinus Vincent, Het Wondertooneel der nature, 1706.

Curiosity cabinets were meant to represent a microcosm: the world in a box. Variety was considered the key to the acquisition of knowledge. The main organizing

1 For more on Oortman's dollhouse and shells, see Grootenboer.

principle of such eclectic collections was the distinction between *artificialia*, artifacts made by the human hand such as coins and ivory figures, and *naturalia*, such as minerals or insects. Due to its hybrid nature, the shell occupied a unique position in this rudimentary classification system. It belonged to both categories, or so it seemed to seventeenth-century eyes. Baffled by shells' otherworldly forms, shell enthusiasts initially did not fully understand how they were "made." First interested primarily in the mollusk's exterior, they had been long ignorant of the sea creature that produced it as its form of shelter. Some still thought, following Aristotle, that shells were born from mud that had been dried by the sun. In early modern inventories, shells are listed as objects within curiosity collections, but they are also found in studies, among papers and books, which indicates that for seventeenth-century scholars, shells were literally things to think with. Erasmus is said to have owned one of the first shell collections in Europe. They were often exchanged among like-minded thinkers. Margaretha van Godewijck received, from her friend and mentor Colvijn in Dordrecht, a shell that she probably kept in her little "museum," which also served as her study.

This widespread scholarly interest yielded considerations of its fascinating shape and form as metaphors for creation. In his long ode to shell-collecting entitled "The Beach" (1612), Philibert van Borsselen compares the human being, God's ultimate creation, to a shell's almost perfect spiral form. Referring to a species called "spiral staircase," he calls out to the Almighty: "Let your Creature be a spiral staircase" ("Laet dyne Schepsel zijn een cromme wendel-trap") (137). In philosophical discourses, the shell became the example par excellence for God's meticulousness when creating the natural world. In a long poem on the benefits of keeping a cabinet of curiosities published in 1748, Christoffel Beudeker uses a shell as evidence that God is the divine mechanical engineer who has designed and created the world:

> Behold [this shell], to which no other kind compares, and tell me whose intellect is able to make a judgment, as to how she is stitched together, her circles chained together, forged by nature's links. Who has invented this art work? you disbeliever! He alone who created all. (160–61; my trans.)

Here it is as if Beudeker has taken a shell from a cabinet and is holding it up to his reader's face: "behold this shell." The word "invented" indicates, significantly, the shell's status as a technological marvel, paradoxically "stitched together" as if by human hands, or more precisely by women's hands, which traditionally stitched linens together as one of the tasks of housework (as so many paintings of the time demonstrate).[2] Declaring a shell to be a stitched-together work of art, Beudeker uses it as an example against the claim of the controversial philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) that nature's beautiful patterns (of flowers or trees, or shells) have not

2 See, for instance, van Asperen.

been created by God but are generated by their own "conception." Nature designs itself, Spinoza claims, and the cause for its existence, rather than being explained away through the existence of a transcendental God, must be found within nature as such. While Aristotle's view that shells were formed by dried mud had, by that time, been largely rejected, it was not yet clear that tiny mollusks build their own shelters around themselves, bit by bit—and indeed according to *their* own design.

Beudeker's stitches are best perceived when holding a shell in your hand. They can be felt on the shell's surface in relief as rims and wobbles, where chalk substances come together. These patterns are visible as well as tangible. I argue that the experience of simultaneously seeing and feeling the material of a shell as something stitched together is a perfect correlative for Merleau-Ponty's concept that humans are "stitched into" the fabric of the world. Touching a shell also involves being touched *by it*, feeling it also involves letting *us* feel *it*. We share visibility and tangibility with our surroundings, Merleau-Ponty insists. That is how we merge into the world: both as perceiving subjects and as other-perceived objects. By letting a shell go through our hands, skin upon mother-of-pearl, our flesh against the "flesh" of the shell, we share surfaces. Unlike what Ingold demonstrated with the stone, our experience with a shell is not that of an observant but rather of a participant, experiencing the oceanic feel of this diminutive vessel from the sea. The intertwining of vision and touch is further articulated by the nautilus' spiral curves, which fold and unfold so that the inside is also the outside and the exterior turns seamlessly into the interior. Only if we understand materiality to be the intertwining of materials, human flesh included, can we overcome the subject-object divide. The thought of the shell as such bridges that gap.

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