



Martand Khosla. *Joule.* Wood. 102" x 35". 2019.
Photograph by Shovan Gandhi. Image courtesy of Nature Morte, Delhi.

How Things Still Matter

Bhrigupati Singh presides over a conversation between Martand Khosla's *1: 2500* and Jessica Stockholder's *Stuff Matters*.

It feels like democracy is transitioning into some other state. The countervailing forces have almost no remaining institutional anchor. For a moment let us not give this spiral here and elsewhere a name or a direction. We may not yet know how to name a political value higher than democracy, brutally defined, with increasing degrees

of brutality, as the rule of the majority. And what is the opposite of brutality? It is not fully clear. So let us think aloud across our respective domains. Is it still possible to think in a minor key? Thinking, we might say, is partly a luxury; call it an activity for those not yet beheaded. The head though is not the only organ of thought. Where

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else is thought crafted? Let us say that galleries are one among such spaces of craft, partly but not only beholden to their patrons, sharing with universities the relatively abstract task of *bildung*, a continuing education, what some philosophers call a sentimental education. What is currently occurring in such spaces, in the shaping of materials and sentiments?

In this essay, I want to consider a resonant thought process, in two art events that occurred roughly simultaneously in mid-2019, Martand Khosla's *1: 2500* at Nature Morte (Delhi) and Jessica Stockholder's *Stuff Matters* at Centraal Museum (Utrecht). I write with no specific expertise, but with the aim of connecting particular currents within what might be a wider community of thought. Criticism might continue thought in another medium, as a kind of synaptic transmission. Both "shows" (I place this word in quotes out of an unspecifiable sense of discomfort) may be viewed within a relatively global tradition, if we might call it that, as open or closed as the circle of contemporary art may be, where the object of investigation is not representation and dissolutions thereof, but rather of asking what makes something a certain kind of object, in relation to what, within which older frames and forms are remembered, dismembered and exceeded, although that could have also been said of the canvas and

the bust, but nonetheless. Different starting points and landmarks may be named within this living tradition, but let us avoid unnecessary citations for the moment. Where has this investigation reached? Let us consider our two instances as separate and joined.

One way to read such movements is to notice signs. Stockholder's title for instance: *Stuff Matters*. Consider for instance that the word "stuff", signals a particular orientation to objects. Duchamp's canonical urinal for instance, could be called a thing, but it could not be called "stuff". Stuff spills into and out of the domestic, with things originating from outside the home, that is to say, connecting private and public forms of consumption and disposal, within and beyond questions of utility and value. Stuff can be disposed. Or it is hoarded and spills over. We might see this pattern consistently in Stockholder's work, beginning with some of her earliest work, for instance *My Father's Backyard* (1983) in which as Szewczyk asserts, "materials tend to misbehave" (2019: 51). What is the consequence of such misbehaviour? Material desires may express forms of upward mobility, as well as oncoming or ongoing catastrophe. Consider for instance a landmark Stockholder work, *Landscape Linoleum* (1998). This is not only a question of domestic consumption and public disposal, but also of more ubiquitous processes through which matter is stilled.



Martand Khosla.
Installation image of the show.
(Centre foreground)
Upwards (reaching for the light).
Steel and reclaimed wood.
Dimensions variable.
2018-2019. Photograph by
Shovan Gandhi. Image courtesy
of Nature Morte, Delhi.

When an object, say an art object, is put into storage, or a household item enters a basement, it is partially disposed. But it mattered enough not to be discarded.

How else might we think of our relation to things? Let us direct our attention to the frame, that in which stuff dwells. Khosla is described as an architect-artist. Conversations about his work often tend to focus on the extent to which these vocations are bifurcated or not. A suggestion we might receive from Khosla's work is not to ask whether he is an architect or an artist, but rather, why more architects have not been artists. I am not invoking "starchitects" here and the idea that buildings may also be considered as artworks. Instead, the shared question I want to pause over in-forms and exceeds the domains we would conventionally describe as art and architecture: how does stuff matter, depending on where and how it is placed and formed? We might read Khosla and Stockholder as chapters in this global conversation, which is more or less urgent, depending on how we read urgency.

How might locality matter in these global conversations? Khosla dwells and works in Delhi. One way to experience present-day Delhi is as an enormous, sporadically, recurrently unsettled construction site. Is it still possible to think within this swirl of particulate matter? What is the mood or spirit in which one might think? No one who entered Khosla's show would have felt complaint or catastrophe or the ruin or uncanny as the animating spirit within this response to urban and more than urban formations. What kinds of movement and stillness might we observe amidst a construction site? Let us ask: what is the matter being stilled? Khosla uses three types of wood: teak, mirandi, and sheesham, salvaged from housing getting demolished around the city. Our dwellings were or are partly composed by the carcasses of a neighboring species. When it is dead we call it wood. How do we name and relate to the living species? Here is the last time I considered the significance of this question, in my book *Poverty and the Quest for Life*, set in the forest villages of Shahabad in central India. I quote an excerpt from my book: "By now, I had walked around enough in the forests to know that tree was as generic a word as human. No one in the area would say tree without specifying a further detail about its *jati* (species/occupation). There is the black-trunked *tendu* (*Diospyros melanoxylon*), in whose leaf the ubiquitous *bedi* (small cigarette) is rolled; the *mahua* (*Madhuca indica*), whose flowers intoxicate, although the fermentation process is now outlawed; the *saagwan* (teak), well built and



Jessica Stockholder. *My Father's Backyard.* Mattress, chicken wire, cupboard door and paint on grass. 1983. Installation view in Vancouver, Canada, 1983. © Jessica Stockholder. Image courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

therefore threatened, always in danger of being hacked; the more common *dhokda* (*Anogeissus pendula*), which provides building material for dwellings; the *ber* (the jujube, *Zizyphus jujuba*), whose thorny wood is used to make domestic boundaries; the *kher* (*Acacia catechu*), important enough to have a whole community named for it (the Kherua, a tribe/caste); the *pipal*, a species of fig tree that is home for Jinn and other spirits, and seat of the Buddha's meditations, spiritual enough for even its Latin name (*Ficus religiosa*) to acknowledge this quality. After a few such walks, I began to recognize how every leaf, bark, fruit, and flower was intimately related to life trajectories. If these trajectories are defined mainly by their use-value, how different are they from a commodity (or a "fetish"—and is any additional value imputed beyond their use merely as a "fetish")? We come to a delicate distinction here regarding intimacies with things, whose use need not sully their value". (Singh 2015: 79)

What kinds of intimacies does an artwork offer us with the dead, formed and deformed? Consider the door, essential to all dwellings. Is that door, distantly visible warped? It was once living. And now? Could it be better embalmed? In conversation with STIR about this door, the curator, Peter Nagy invokes and refuses an image from the history of art that many of us might be familiar with, the surrealism of Dali. The warped door is not a melted clock. And what is the difference? Nagy calls this "domesticated surrealism". But this door is not necessarily domesticated or surreal. It is consciously in a yogic posture, in the way



Jessica Stockholder. *Landscape Linoleum.* Pools, two heat lamps, two circular concrete slabs, scaffolding, 17 car bodies, blur rope and painted grass and trees. 1998. Installation view at Middelheim Sculpture Park, Antwerp, Belgium, 1998. © Jessica Stockholder. Image courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.



that Dali's clocks are not. As crucially, the connecting thread between the conscious and unconscious, outside and inside worlds, is wood, inasmuch as we might still consider material to be a site of thought, and creation to be matter stilled differently, however minor the warp or nudge may be.

What will matter do left to itself? It may offer gentle or sharp refusals, involuntarily reshaping itself, against the will of all the matter-shaping vocations, architect, artist, plumber, carpenter, tinker, tailor. We cannot live without our chop and thump, and whatever other forms of violence we knowingly and unknowingly wreak on our habitat. But what then is the opposite of our ever-present potential for brutality? Khosla tentatively invites us to consider wood as a connecting thread, as a still enduring condition of dwelling, of still life after death, and of art, even in its most traditional form of the hung canvas, as an outgrowth of wood.

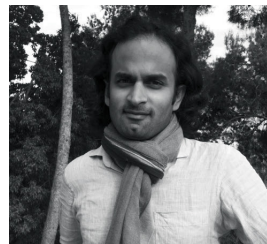
Some say that art must further intensify its exit from galleries, since such spaces can be stuffy and exclusive. But what if the air and spaces outside are not necessarily more conducive to freedom? What modest offerings might an architect-artist make, beneath the imposing billboards and monuments created by contemporary capital and sovereigns of yore? Are there minor interventions that might still be made that do not embody the chop and thump of sovereign power, beauty though that might also have produced in times past? Now there is not that much space left. The mood that matter expresses in Khosla's work is not that of muscularity but of gentleness and suggestion. Are there further suggestions that we might still explore?

While I may not have the power to commission, writing might relay suggestions from one artist to another. Stockholder has a signature form that has appeared in cities all over the world. She calls it *Assist*. But what does it mean to "assist"? Consider a somewhat specific valence of this term, as it used in yoga studios today the world over, however objectionably bourgeois or not, such spaces might be. We are warped and fragile, lying or standing, in discomfort. A good yoga teacher stops by briefly. With a touch, an assist, the position is suddenly more bearable, even though the change has been relatively minor. Moving ahead from *I: 2500*, we might request Khosla's assistance, in private and public spaces, in his investigation of how the matter-shaping vocations are joined. And in the slower tempos of citizenly dwelling, in ways that still matter, such investigations may be one relatively minor antidote to democratic brutality, independent of right and left. /

Contributors

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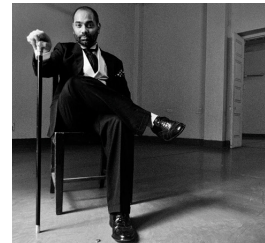


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