

Porosity

Material Explorations

Porous – having minute interstices through which air, fluids etc. may pass; can also mean – not retentive or secure, esp. admitting the passage of people, information (Oxford English Dictionary).

The term is employed in multiple disciplines, and in a contemporary sense, porosity has come to embody multivalent interpretations, revealing a more capricious understanding of the term.

In an architectural context, perceptions of porosity in the built environment have evolved since Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis’ 1925 essay on Naples. ¹ Benjamin and Lacis² used the term to describe the urban characteristics of the city of Naples; its dual porous nature stems from its foundations on porous volcanic rock, coupled with the built form’s physical porosity, expressed by permeable networks of public/private spaces, passages and borders. At the time of writing for Benjamin and Lacis, these merged spaces facilitated utopian and dystopian social interactions.

Since this early C20th essay, the architect Steven Holl (amongst others), has explored the term in relation to his architectural practice. In particular, Holl has written and experimented with porosity’s multiple identities linked to phenomenological experience, highlighted below:

The former arguments for the porosity of architecture, urbanism, and landscape can be reinforced with a testament for the porosity of spirit and matter as well as light’s effect through form, shade, and shadow. Rather than a pre-occupation with solid, independent object-like forms, it is experiential phenomena of spatial sequences within, around, and between which triggers emotions and joy in the experience of architecture. Steven Holl: Architecture Spoken, Rizzoli, New York, 2007, p. 106

More recently, ideas of porosity continue to generate interest in relation to the built environment. The theorist Douglas Smith suggests porosity’s changeable (open) tendency may be its strength and its downfall: ‘...sometimes criticized as an over-used and imprecise notion, particularly in writing about Naples, but also more generally in the theory and practice of urbanism.’³

The invited artists in this exhibition materially explore the term’s ‘openness’ and mine the formal and semantic potential of the term’s identities, using overt, subtle and hidden methodologies.

In many ways, Caroline Di Costa’s pieces connect to Holl’s ideas of, ‘...experiential phenomena ‘.

In exploring the voids in two residences, the artist highlights domestic space where the ‘emotions and joy’ exist. By deconstructing the residences into occupiable, solid, and translucent spaces, Di Costa’s work encourages us to contemplate the porosity between public/private space, but also the significance of the affective (sensorial) register within built spaces.

Continuing his interest in exploring colour relationships, Jurek Wybraniec’s paintings speak of porosity in subtle and hidden ways, and explore literal and metaphoric readings of the term. Starting from an almost non-porous material (aluminium composite) he renders the surface porous, by building layers (akin to the priming of canvas) to create a porous substrate equivalent to watercolour paper and evocative of skin. Wybraniec then paints the surface (with multiple layers of washes) allowing the bleeding of colour to become a controlled/uncontrolled signature of the work (suggestive of the process), and another porous feature.

Joshua Webb’s elegant sculptures also approach porosity conceptually and materially, emphasising its gregarious condition. Using porous 3D printed material, Webb’s digitally conceived creations form intriguing spatial voids using traditional patterns/structures. They evoke different responses yet encourage a dialogue between them. Kagome Kamasutra conjures the intimate, the erotic, emotion, and sense of protection. Andromeda’s lattice-like structure metaphorically suggests slippage between universal binaries: order/chaos, open and closedness, the familiar/unfamiliar, etc.

Paul Caporn’s intriguing and precarious sculpture, Sprue 2, explores porosity overtly and subtly. The sprue is a structural armature for the plastic injection process, no longer required after model making is complete. The casting process involved in the creation of models requires a porous passage for the liquid to travel through, which then solidifies. Underpinning the physical process, is Caporn’s conceptual and playful desire to transform the plastic model sprues into a captivating, fragile, form.

Pamela Gaunt’s illuminated pieces are partially inspired by Holl’s experiments on porosity. Working with translucent material and light she endeavours to evoke sensorial responses in the viewer. The material’s porosity, plus industrial routing and engraving interventions in the surface of coloured Perspex and mirror acrylic, disrupts the penetration of light. Rabble #I grew out of the desire to utilise off-cuts from a public art project. Local Rain #I & #II continue Gaunt’s interest in transforming ubiquitous patterns – rain configurations on glass – highlighting the significance of the long absences of rain experienced in this city.

Pamela Gaunt
Guest Curator, Wallace
July 2024

¹ Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis, “Naples,” Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1978), 166-167. See also https://www.columbia.edu/itc/architecture/ockman/pdfs/session_8/benjamin.pdf

² Research suggests Lacis (Benjamin’s intellectual collaborator) may be responsible for the term. See Sophie Wolfrum, Porosity ↔ Porous City, in Porous City: From Metaphor to Urban Agenda, , (Basel, Birkhauser, 2018), p. 16.

³ Porosity And The Transnational: Travelling Theory Between Naples And Frankfurt (Walter Benjamin, Asja Lacis And Ernst Bloch), in: Forum for Modern Language Studies Vol. 57, No. 2, doi: 10.1093/fmls/cqab001 Advance Access Publication 22 April 2021.