In defense of materiality: Attending to the sensori-social life of things

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Abstract
This article presents a defense of the concept of materiality in the face of Tim Ingold’s critique of the concept as part of his “efforts to restore anthropology to life” in Being Alive and elsewhere. While acknowledging the forcefulness of Ingold’s stress on the “liveliness” of materials, and doctrine of perception “as action” (not representation), it critiques the way he neuters the perceiving subject, abstracts the senses, disregards the sensuous pleasures of making, and elides the sensori-social life of things. Three case studies are presented by way of illustration: the sensorial archaeology of perception, the “exuberant materiality” of the Byzantine bas-relief metal icon, and the tactility of “ladies’ craftwork” in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. In place of Ingold’s ideal-typical figures – the rootless wayfarer, the skilled craftsman – this article brings out the situatedness of the human subject within a particular tradition, or sensory and social regime, and how this mediates their construction and perception of things and other persons.

Keywords
affordance-thinking, ecological psychology, materiality, material culture studies, polysensoriality, sensory anthropology and history

Introduction
In recent years, the concept of materiality, which is at the heart of material culture studies, has been subjected to a withering critique by Tim Ingold. In an essay called “Materials Against Materiality” (Ingold, 2011: ch. 2; see also 2013: ch. 2) he eviscerated the concept as part of his “efforts to restore anthropology to life” (2011: 4). This effort involves striving to convince us to see materials as “coursing with life” and view making as a “process of growth” – not fabrication. In the result, the concept of materiality
is exposed as so much “deadweight,” and the material culture scholar is pictured (or rather pilloried) as labouring under the delusion of objectification.

It is surprising that there has not been more pushback given how vital the field of material culture, with its ideas of “the social life of things” (Appadurai, 1983) and “the social life of materials” (Drazin and Küchler 2015) has become. The problem with these approaches, according to Ingold, if we interpret him correctly, is that “life” is pre-faced with the idea of the social, and “material” is qualified by the notion of culture. For his part, Ingold would do away with these constructs. As regards the social, Ingold (2000: 5) insists that “relations among humans, that we are accustomed to calling ‘social,’ are but a subset of ecological relations.” As regards culture: “humans can enter into meaningful relations with the world without these relations having to be mediated by the concepts and categories of a cultural tradition. Culture, in short, doesn’t get in between people and their environments. Nothing is between” (2018b: 4).¹ What lurks beneath these pronouncements is the “ecological psychology” of J.J. Gibson (1979), Ingold’s hero, whose work we will have the opportunity to examine in due course.

By framing things the way he does, Ingold ushers in what could be called a post-social, pre-cultural anthropology. Quite a number of contemporary anthropologists appear to find his ground-clearing operation convincing, refreshing, and even liberating, judging from the number of citations Ingold’s work has attracted according to Google Scholar (76,000 + ). But is Ingold’s way really the way of “life”? Is his world – a world from which the social anthropologists of yore have all been excommunicated – really that capacious? And, of particular concern to the present writer (as one who has been tending the field of the anthropology of the senses for the past three decades): Is sensory anthropology, with its emphasis on the cultural mediation of perception, really as wrongheaded as Ingold pretends? (Ingold would substitute “the idea of direct perception” for that of the mediated sensorium, as will be discussed presently). For my part, I think the concept of materiality is a tremendously powerful and productive one, and in what follows my aim is to show that a focus on the transmission of culture by material means and attending to the sensori-social life of things can be profoundly educational and revelatory.

**Background**

I have met Tim Ingold in person a number of times over the years. One particularly memorable occasion was at the 2014 meeting of the American Anthropological Association, where we had been invited to participate in a panel organized by our mutual friend, David Sutton. During the question period, I brought up some of my objections to Ingold’s philosophy of linealogy – the idea of “life as lived along lines” (Ingold, 2007, 2015) – and he refuted them with characteristic aplomb. Later, after a long and deeply illuminating private conversation, when it came time to part, as a token of our mutual respect, we exchanged books. I gave him a copy of *The Sixth Sense Reader* (2009) and he gave me a copy of *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (2013), which I treasure.

The similarities between these two books are illuminating to consider: both take aim at cognitivism, both treat perception as a dynamic process (and so challenge empiricism,
with its idea of the senses as passive receptors, as well), and both books seek to trouble the received wisdom. Thus, *The Sixth Sense Reader* troubles the model of the five-sense sensorium by gathering evidence of the many different forms which this notion of a “sixth sense” has taken in history and across cultures, such as, in the case of the Western tradition: speech, the common sense or *sensus communis* (not to be confused with common sense), the spiritual senses, sex organs, animal magnetism, the sense of beauty (or “seventh sense,” actually) and diverse other senses without organs, the interoceptive senses (proprioception, kinaesthesia, etc.), psychic abilities or Extrasensory Perception (ESP), and the sense of self itself. Cross-cultural examples include: speech, “visions” induced by the ingestion of hallucinogens or some form of sensory deprivation, sensing imminent disasters, people who come back from the dead bringing wisdom, and the Buddhist doctrine of the mind as a sense on a par with the other five.

Meanwhile, Ingold’s book troubles the hylomorphic model of making. Pointing the finger at Aristotle, Ingold (2011: 210) writes: “To create any thing, Aristotle reasoned, you have to bring together form (*morphē*) and matter (*hyle*). In the subsequent history of western thought, … [form] came to be seen as imposed by an agent with a particular design in mind, while matter, thus rendered passive and inert became that which was imposed upon.” Ingold’s avowed aim is to “overthrow” this model and replace it with the morphogenetic model – that is, “an ontology that assigns primacy to the processes of formation as against their final products, and to the flows and transformations of materials as against states of matter” (2011: 210). Thus, to create any thing is “a question not of imposing preconceived forms on inert matter but of [the craftsperson] intervening in the field of force and currents of material wherein forms are generated” (2011: 211). As a corollary to this overthrow, Ingold blasts a series of other cherished anthropological theoretical constructs, such as agency, animism, and, of course, materiality.

While similar in spirit and in the targets they take aim at (i.e. cognitivism, empiricism), the respective approaches of these two books could not be more different in one key regard. *The Sixth Sense Reader* takes a cultural approach to the study of its subject matter, whereas Ingold is hostile to any approach or field of study that contains culture in its definition, such as visual culture (rooted in art history), auditory culture (or sound-scape studies), material culture (or materiality). Thus, he is critical of art history and the anthropology of art for reducing sight to the perusal of images. Images are but “reflex[es] of vision” in his estimation – that is, paintings and such like are objectifications of visual processes, which convert the eyes into “instruments of playback” (Ingold, 2011: 137). As far as Ingold is concerned, perusing images “has nothing to do with observation, with looking around in the environment …[or] with the experience of illumination” that makes vision possible in the first place (in Ingold and Howes 2011: 316). In short, visuality, as understood within visual culture studies, smacks of idolatry. There are echoes here of the biblical injunction against “gods made by human hands” (i.e. the heathen idol made of wood or stone), which have “eyes but do not see, … ears but do not hear” in the words of Psalm 115 (quoted and discussed in Avrahami 2012: 189-95). Ingold (2012: 1-6) is particularly vituperative in his denunciation of the paintings of René Magritte for the visual tricks they play, as in *Ceci n’est pas un pipe* or *La Condition humaine*. We should not be amused by Magritte’s visual hijinks just as we
should guard our ears against the deceptive remonstrances of the high priests of visual culture, Ingold warns.

Ever the iconoclast, Ingold (2011: ch. 11) has also trained his sights on the concept of soundscape, building on his prior critique of visual culture. Here he would appear to have the work of The World Soundscape Project directed by R. Murray Schafer in his cross-hairs (though it could equally be the recordings of Steve Feld, such as *Voices of the Rainforest*). The World Soundscape Project assembled a vast library of soundings from far-flung places. Ingold’s objections in this case have to do with the way landscapes are reformatted as soundscapes – that is, as objects of analysis by means of some audio-recording technology. Thanks to the recordings, the ears become “instruments of playback.” As such they are diverted from their proper function as “organs of observation” in the same way that the eyes are “allegorized” (his term) when sight is confined to the contemplation of images in visual culture (Ingold in Ingold and Howes, 2011: 316).

Another of his objections to the concept of soundscape is expressed in terms of what could be called the amodality hypothesis: sound is “not the object but the medium of our perception. It is what we hear in” in the same way that “we do not see light but see in it” (Ingold, 2011: 138 and 2000: 265). Here, Ingold is channeling Gibson’s theory of the senses considered as “perceptual systems.” According to Ingold, vision, understood as a “mode of active, exploratory engagement with the environment … has much more in common with audition than is often supposed” (in Ingold and Howes, 2011: 313-14).²

Indeed, viewed from this perspective, vision and hearing are “interchangeable” (Ingold, 2000: 128-9, 245, 276-81).

A moment’s reflection will reveal the fallacy of these objections. First, Ingold’s position is curiously ante-technological. It is a philosophy of the innocent eye, untainted by the perusal of images, and the naked ear, unmediated by any audio-technology. Second, images such as paintings do mediate our perception of the environment, even when we are not looking at them directly -- the very idea of landscape being a case in point. As Ron Broglio brings out in *Technologies of the Picturesque: British Art, Poetry and Instruments, 1750-1830* (2008), the idea of landscape was born of a particular painterly style, mediated by the use of the Claude glass. Third, R. Murray Schaffer (1977) introduced an important correction to the visualism of landscape studies by inventing the concept of the soundscape and proposing various “ear-cleaning” techniques to help attune us to the other-than-visual dimensions of the environment. His insight, or better insound, was picked up on by the geographer J. Douglas Porteous, author of *Landscapes of the Mind: Worlds of Sense and Metaphor* (1990), who introduced such concepts as the smellscape, bodyscape, and tastescape to add yet more other-than-visual dimensions to our perception (and analysis) of the environment. Ingold is positively apoplectic at this proliferation of scapes: “I deplore the fashion for fashioning *scapes* of every possible kind” (Ingold 2011: 136).

It bears noting that the sensory divisions of the landscape have also been magnified and/or amplified by practitioners from across a range of disciplines apart from geography: many sociologists and anthropologists have laboured to finetune the practice of the “soundwalk” (Polli, 2017), the “smellwalk” (Henshaw, 2017), and the “touch tour” (Howes et al., 2013). Ingold rails against these practices of attunement that divide up the environment along sensory lines based on the doctrine, which he derives from
Merleau-Ponty (1962), of the “synergic system” of the body and “prereflective unity” of the senses: “the eyes and ears should not be understood as separate keyboards for the registration of sensation but as organs of the body as a whole, in whose movement, within an environment, the activity of perception consists” (Ingold, 2000: 268, emphasis added). This affirmation also formed the basis of his amodality (or interchangeability) thesis regarding how the senses function, as discussed above.

The diminution of the social

Why is Ingold so dismissive of the social? Curiously enough, his resistance is ostensibly grounded in the evidence of the senses themselves, as when he writes: “You can see and touch a fellow human being, but have you ever seen or touched a society? We may think we live in societies, but can anyone ever tell where their society ends and another begins?” and a few lines later states: “Granted that we are not sure what societies are or even whether they exist at all” (Ingold, 2011: 238). Now, I would agree that it is appropriate to debate such concepts as “society” or “culture,” and Ingold has played a key role in promoting such debates (see Ingold, 1996), but the point should be to refine them, not reject them wholesale. Marcel Mauss ([1936] 2007), with his insistence on adopting a “triple viewpoint” (physiological, psychological, sociological) on all things corporeal, would be aghast at Ingold’s posturing. In any event, his agnosticism with respect to society is not well-founded, and any right-minded sociologist would be quick to see through his subterfuge. For example, while it could be argued that society may not be seeable, as Ingold says, social facts are certainly felt, according to Durkheim (1982). More fundamentally, the distinction Ingold posits between the social and the sensible is belied by the de facto indissociability of the two (Laplantine, 2015). For example, there are those who must struggle to be seen or have their voices heard and who recoil at the touch of those in power, such as the police (Howes and Classen, 2014: ch. 4). As for the suggestion that it is difficult to tell where one society ends and another begins, tell that to the colonized and oppressed. They will tell you differently.

One of the cardinal principles of sensory anthropology, first articulated by Constance Classen in “Foundations for an Anthropology of the Senses” (1997) and reiterated by her in Ways of Sensing, is that: “Anthropologists must be attentive to intracultural variation, for there are typically persons or groups who differ on the sensory values [and practices] embraced by the society at large, and resist, instead of conform to, the prevailing sensory regime” (Howes and Classen, 2014: 12; Classen, 1997: 402). This same point goes a fortiori for cross-cultural variations in the agencement of the senses. But Ingold is oblivious to such variation, because he has extirpated the concept of culture from his toolkit. If there are no cultures, then there is nothing to cross.

After interjecting that we should take for “Granted that we are not sure what societies are, or even whether they exist at all,” Ingold (2011: 238) proposes, “could we not simply say that anthropology is the study of people?” By “people” Ingold would appear to mean l’homme nu, given his disparagement of the idea of cultural transmission (see Ingold 2018a). This stems from his “ontogenetical fixation.” To explain: at various points in his writings, Ingold plays up “ontogeny,” the development of the individual, and occults or trivializes “phylogeny,” the evolution of the species, including the state of
society. In defense of his position, it could be argued that he takes a processual rather than
static view of society (see Ingold, 2011: 234). Indeed, he writes at length of the individual
as “an undivided centre of movement and awareness” in a “field of relations” (136). But
this emphasis on “relations” (without further specification) actually forestalls any deeper
analysis in terms of social structure.

From an anthropological perspective (as opposed to Ingold’s more philosophical take
on things), the individual is a product of the intersection of gender, race or ethnic and
class divisions. (Ingold seldomly addresses these sort of constraints in his writings,
one exception being Part II of his book The Skolt Lapps Today (1976), which explicitly
concerns social structure.) Indeed, his conception of the individual is remarkably neo-
liberal or generic. This is apparent in the gender trouble on display in the Epilogue to
Being Alive. For example, on one page he rightly upbraids C.W. Mills: “Apart from its
presumption that all social scientists are men, Mills’ essay ‘On intellectual craftsmanship’
remains as relevant today as it was fifty years ago,” then on the next page he reverts to the
default (i.e. generic) mode in which “man” encompasses “woman” and “he” includes
“she”, as when he writes: “the anthropologist’s observations answer to his experience
of habitation” (Ingold, 2011: 240, 241; see further Howes, 2022: 8).

As with gender, so with race. It is all very well for Ingold to propose that we think of the
self as “an undivided centre of movement and awareness” (2011: 136) but if you are Black
in the USA, do not jog or you risk being shot and killed (as in the tragic case of Ahmaud
Arbery),3 and your chances for “growth” are notoriously stultified. Opportunities for
sensory enjoyment and/or refinement are also conditioned by social class as Marx under-
scored in his account of the worker living amidst “the sewage of civilization,” bereft of
“a musical ear [or] an eye for beauty of form – in short senses capable of human gratifica-
tions”; the worker “only feels himself freely active in his animal functions – eating
[scabby potatoes], drinking [cheap gin], procreating” (Marx quoted and discussed in
Howes, 2005a; see further Jaffe et al., 2019). Think also of the sliding scale of social dis-
tinction in matters of taste (Bourdieu, 1984). Society is not insensible in its effects.

Ingold may well be in full possession of his senses, as when he writes “I am, at once,
my tasting, my listening, and the rest” (Ingold and Howes, 2011: 330). This is only to
be expected, given his exalted social status. But when he legislates his own subjective
experience for all humanity, as those of a phenomenological persuasion are wont to
do, he errs. There is far too much evidence in the ethnographic record of the decentring
of the self along sensory lines, such as “dancing the Word” when one is forbidden (as a
woman) to “preach the Word” (the preserve of men) in the charismatic churches of inner
New York City (Elisha, 2018) or the social construction of blindness and deafness
(Hammer, 2019; Graif, 2018) for us to attach much credence to Ingold’s position. His
position smacks of neoliberalism, the philosophy of the generic individual (Taylor,
1992).

As we are beginning to see, Ingold neuters the senses (the interchangeability hypoth-
esis), neuters class, neuters gender – albeit he is at least somewhat conflicted on the latter
score (see, for example, the rare discussion in Ingold, 2000: ch. 17). He would protest that
he espouses not a neoliberal but a “relational” conception of the individual, and, as noted
above, he does go on at length about “relations,” but this is just so much surface dross in
the absence of a properly social analysis, which Ingold blithely skips over in the name of Gibson’s “ecological equation.”

**Against interpretation**

Another of Ingold’s bugbears is the notion of semiosis, or “the science of signs in society” as initially formulated by Ferdinand de Saussure (see Ingold, 2000: 247-9). To the near infinite (insofar as they are precoded) possibilities for signification of structural linguistics, Ingold opposes the non-representational “possibilities for action” that are given in Gibson’s theory of “affordances.” “Affordance-thinking” is the name he gives to Gibson’s “ecological” approach to perception. It bears underlining that affordances are not mental constructs, but rather inherent in the environment itself, as “specified” in a given optical or other sensory array (see Howes 2022: 7; see further Ingold, 2000: 166 and 2011: 77-9). Assuming the givenness of affordances, Ingold goes on to posit “the idea of direct perception,” which holds that “living beings can find meaning in an environment unmediated by signs. … It asserts that we perceive things directly, as they come forward into presence and impinge on our [practical] activity, not indirectly through the signs they leave in their wake” (2018b: 41). On this account, perception is “a mode of action” (2000: 166), not representation, and not interpretation. “Interpretation comes later” whereas “perception carries on” at what Ingold appears to think of as an infracultural level (2018b: 41, 39 emphasis in original).

Ingold is evidently squarely “against interpretation,” a position which has considerable currency in contemporary anthropology, and his protests against the hypostatization of the sign and precession of interpretation are not without merit. However, the fallacy of his doctrine of direct perception, with its psychophysical conceit, should be apparent to anyone with training in the history of anthropology. Consider Franz Boas’s first published piece in the *American Anthropologist*, entitled “On Alternating Sounds” ([1888] 2018). In this piece, Boas relates how, during his sojourn in the Canadian arctic, he was startled to discover that he had recorded the sounds of certain Inuktitut words differently on different occasions, and his review of the literature led him to conclude that other observers chronically did likewise. He went on to suggest that “mishearings” of sounds in a foreign language could be explained as a consequence of the observers “apperceiving” them in light of the known sounds of their own language, and assimilating them to the latter. He then extrapolated his thesis to the effect that “a new sensation is apperceived by means of similar sensations that form part of our knowledge” (Boas, 2018: 35) to other fields of sense besides audition, such as colour perception and olfaction:

It is well known that many languages lack a term for green. If we show an individual speaking such a language a series of green worsteds, he will call part of them yellow, another part blue, the limit of both divisions being doubtful. Certain colors he will classify today as yellow, tomorrow as blue. He apperceives green by means of yellow and blue. We apperceive odors in the same way, and classify new odors with those to which they are similar (ibid.)
These reflections called into question the most elementary tenet of psychophysics – namely, the concept of the “differential threshold” or “just noticeable difference,” for what they indicate is that the discrimination and/or classification of perceptual differences as of similarities is culturally contingent. The implication is that our attention to the environment is always informed to some degree by the transmission of culture, yet in *Anthropology and/as Education* (2018a), Ingold drives a wedge between attention and transmission, and hives off the latter.

**Whither materiality?**

Ingold’s critique of the concept of materiality is wicked – wickedly funny in many instances. Where does the material end and the immaterial begin? he asks in one of his many artful deployments of the old *reductio ad absurdum* argument. Why are material culture scholars so preoccupied with the made and not the making – that is, with finished products when there is actually no end to finishing given the “liveliness” (including processes of transformation, deterioration, and so forth) of materials? Ingold points to many instances of “the dead hand of materiality” and the “deadweight of Durkheim’s sociologism” (2011: 28, 235) in the writings of material culture scholars. What of life? he asks repeatedly, uproariously. What were these material cultural types thinking? Touché!

Some of Ingold’s points have substance. Matter is not inert, for instance. However, his account also overrides important distinctions of immense historical and technical significance, such as that between properties and qualities, or substance and qualia. This came up in a debate with the design theorist David Pye. Ingold (2011: 29) excoriates Pye for suggesting that “it is not really the properties of materials that an artist or craftsperson seeks to express, but rather their qualities” (see further 30-1)

To appreciate all that is at stake in Ingold’s debate with Pye, a little background is necessary. *Qualia* refers to those aspects of materials that are dependent on the human perceptual apparatus, such as colour (humans perceive only a fraction of the electromagnetic spectrum; infrared and x-rays are off the human scale) or sound (the range of human hearing is from 20-20,000 Hz, which excludes so-called infrasounds). *Property* refers to the intrinsic aspects of materials, such as number, mass, etc. In an earlier (Aristotelian, pre-Lockean) epistemology, there were “proper sensibles” (for example, the proper object of vision is colour, that of hearing sound, that of smell odour, etc.) and “common sensibles” (such as form, mass, number) which can be perceived by more than one sense at the same time (Howes, 2009: 16-8). The seventeenth century British philosopher, John Locke, who was a proponent of the new corpuscular philosophy (introduced by the chemist Robert Boyle) and who was fascinated by the implications of microscopy, inverted the relation between “proper” and “common” sensibles, recasting the latter as “primary qualities” (read: properties) and the former as “secondary qualities” (read: qualia). This switch sounded the death knell of “the science of the concrete” (Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Lévi-Strauss and Eribon, [1988] 2018) as far as Western science was concerned, and gave us modern physics, or life under the microscope (Howes 2017: 163-4). Thus, modern scientific philosophy transformed the cosmos from “a vibrant universe of sense,” as during the medieval period, “into what Alfred North Whitehead has called ‘a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless [in its
elementary constituents]; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly” (Classen, 1998: 5).

It is difficult for us moderns to grasp the magnitude of this ontological transformation. Two further examples may help. According to classical science, the universe was composed of four elements: Earth, Water, Air, and Fire. Each element was distinguished by a different combination of the hot and the cold, the wet and the dry. This concrete, sensuous understanding of the elements endured for many centuries, until the latter were dissolved by Mendeleev into the 63 (now 118) elements of his Periodic Table of Elements, based on their atomic number and recurring chemical properties.

Another example of the kind of premodern sensory cosmology that was eclipsed by the Scientific Revolution is given in the book *Aurora* by the German Protestant philosopher and mystic Jakob Böhme. He lived from 1575 to 1624, dying just eight years before Locke was born. Böhme held that “at the heart of the cosmos are seven spirits: Astringency [or Sourness], Sweetness, Bitterness, Heat, Love, Sound and Nature. These spirits continually interact with and generate each other,” along with the world (Classen 1998: 21). Imagine that! Imagine conceiving of sensory qualities, such as sweetness and bitterness, as elemental, cosmic forces.

This understanding of sensory qualities as powers also undergirds traditional Chinese medicine, with its elaborate concoctions of flavours (Farquahar 2002: 64-6, 75). Modern western biomedicine scoffs at the suggestion that such “secondary qualities” as flavours could have any therapeutic properties or agency, and so relegates the Chinese herbal remedies to the lowly rung of “complementary” or “alternative medicine” (see further Barcan 2011). When Ingold (2011: 22-4, 30) scoffs at Pye’s dichotomous understanding of the material (in terms of subjective qualities vs. objective properties) and substitutes Gibson’s trinity of substances, media and surfaces in its place, he is likewise being very modern (Metcalf 2007). In this fell swoop, he also effectively neutralizes the sensuous (read: aesthetic) disposition of the author of *The Nature and Aesthetics of Design* (Pye, 1978) and, arguably, of craftspeople the world over.

As noted previously, Ingold would have us abandon the hylomorphic model of making and subscribe to the morphogenetic model instead. Here he definitely has a point, but does not this substitution merely perpetuate the formalism that was at the root of the problem in the first instance? Does it not simply counter an emphasis on form-giving (by some agent) with an emphasis on the “form-taking activity” of matter (see Ingold, 2013: 25)? Is there no way out of this (vicious) circle, this formalist obsession? There is, providing one aspires to keep one’s wits (an archaic term for senses) about one and does not allow them to be straightjacketed by “affordance-thinking.”

As discussed elsewhere (Howes, 2006), this other way was opened up by the sensory turn in material culture studies as exemplified by the work of the UCL Material Culture Group, including Christopher Tilley, Daniel Miller, Barbara Bender, and Victor Buchli (see Buchli, 2002). It is also evidenced by the work of the archaeologist Yannis Hamilakis, the art historian Bissera Pentcheva, and the cultural historian Constance Classen. The latter scholars, whose works shall be considered next, have all made important contributions to what could be called the paradigm of “the sensori-social life of things.”
The sensori-social approach to things does not pry matter and materiality apart, but rather embraces and sensualizes them. It starts from the recognition that artefacts and commodities (as well as buildings, landscapes, etc.) are bundles of social relations – that is, they concretize the social relations of production, as Marx taught us (see further Howard, 2018) – and, at the same time, bundles of sensory qualities or sensual relations. Thus, in addition to their material constituents, artefacts and commodities have colour, give off (or absorb) sound, emit odours, and present a particular feel or texture, as well as taste. In other words, the materiality of things is social and sensible as well as, well, material. In “Why some things matter,” Daniel Miller (1998: 9) puts it this way: “through dwelling on the more mundane sensual and material qualities of the object, we are able to unlock the more subtle connections with cultural lives and values that are objectified through these forms, in part because of the qualities they possess.” Otherwise put, the form is not the thing, or not all there is to things in any event (see further Classen, 2017; Coupaye, 2018).

Sensorial archaeology of perception

In Archeology and the Senses (2014), Yannis Hamilakis proposes a “framework of sensoriality” for archaeological research – that is, he leans in with the senses. His account is rich with references to “the sensuous properties of matter,” and it treats things (including technology) as the “concrete materialization of perceptual modes” (2014: 21). He asserts that in as much as archaeology involves “unearthing the material traces of the past” (2014: 34), those traces are not inert, but should rather be regarded as fragments of sensoria, or embodiments of differing Umwelts (to use Jakob von Uexküll’s [1982] 2018 term). Contrary to the conventional focus of archaeology on constructing typologies based on considerations of form or morphology, Hamilakis (2014: 50, 88-9) urges us to look at a pot, for example, and notice not only that it has a certain form, but also how it has certain qualities (e.g. its surface may be rough or smooth), to ponder the sensuousness of its contents (e.g. food or drink), and reconstruct how it would have figured in particular social contexts or transactions.

According to Hamilakis, the “framework of sensoriality,” which is given in his idea of the “sensorial field,” challenges the conventional parcelling of experience along discrete sensory lines and also “counters and undermines the subject-object dichotomy, the sensing subject and the sensed object” by foregrounding the “transaction between the subject of sensation and the sensible” (quoting Merleau-Ponty at 2014: 66). On this account, perception is a two-way street (see Classen 1993: 2), and in line with this, the focus of sensorial archeology, Hamilakis (2014: 14) argues: “should not be on individual senses but on the field of sensoriality and on the affective and mnemonic flows it engenders.”

Hamilakis has high hopes for his sensorial archaeology:

the field of archeology, having primary access to the materiality of the world, is in a privileged position to explore the sensuous arenas and to contribute immensely to the broader discussion on sensorial experience and its social-power effects … [by] deriving a new
understanding (which will also engender a new practice) of the entanglement between materiality and human sensory and sensuous action and experience (2014: 5, 9, emphasis added).

He goes on to posit that “the senses are infinite and innumerable, and an archeology of sensoriality can in fact contribute to the exploration of hitherto unrecognized sensory modalities” (4), including such senses without organs as the sense of place, the sense of intoxication, and the sense of time (i.e. time not as some a priori category of mind (Kant) but the time-sense as a product of the experience of “flow”). Hamilakis’ work gives new meaning to the Foucauldian notion of an “archaeology of perception.” The “sensorial field” is not, however, a “discursive formation” (pace Foucault): it is a sensory formation. The recent publication of the Handbook of Sensory Archaeology (Skeates and Day, 2020), with its emphasis on the sensate, testifies to how far the materials vs. materiality debate has evolved since Ingold first framed it.7

The performative icon

In “The Performative Icon” (2006), and again at greater length in The Sensual Icon (2010), Bissera Pentcheva presents an analysis of the fabrication and veneration of religious icons in medieval Byzantium. There were two kinds of icons: the painted icon consisting of a flat wood panel painted with tempera, and the bas-relief metal icon fashioned from gold, silver or ivory and decorated with exquisite filigree along with pearls, gemstones, and coloured glass. Her focus is on the latter.

There are many fine technical, sensual and theological distinctions to be mastered before we can arrive at an understanding of the relief icon in all its “exuberant materiality,” as Pentcheva puts it. One is that the metal icon bears the “imprint of form” as distinct from the “imitation of form” since, in contrast to the illusion of resemblance (imitation) to some originary being (essence) that is achieved through painting, the metal icon involves the mechanical reproduction of a prototype, or typos (Pentcheva, 2010: 9-14, 28-36). In its earliest form, the typos consisted of a stamp. Being a stamp, an imprinted relief, the metal icon materialized the absent sacred figure and thus rendered the latter tangible even as the icon itself consisted of nothing more than the imprint of absence on matter. Pentcheva (2006: 639) explains, using the figuration of the Archangel Michael by way of illustration:

By nature, the [Archangel Michael] is fire and spirit. Human beings can grasp him only through the imprint he leaves on matter. For instance, Saint Michael’s shrines at Chonai and Monte S. Gargano are perceived as imprints left by him on the landscape. A chasm (Chonai) and a shrine carved in the rock (S.Gargano), they form giant fossils: contact relics giving tangibility to the angel’s present absence. For this reason, the relief icon as typos becomes the only truthful form of representation for the Archangel. By its definition, it is the imprint of absence. His enamel icon in S. Marco is even closer to the truth, for it is an imprint of fire on glass. Its materially saturated surfaces inundate the senses and simulate the angel’s presence.
The negativity of the “present absence” was important, for it shielded the relief icon from being branded essentialist and therefore liable to be destroyed during the waves of iconoclasm that swept the civilization. The fineness of this distinction was eventually lost, however.

In any event, while the relief icon was lacking in “presence” (essence) it was rich in what Pentcheva calls “presence effects.” In the following passage, she brings out how these phenomenal effects should be thought of as “performative,” and documents how the icon’s performance tied in with other aspects of the liturgy of the Byzantine Eastern Orthodox Church (such as the use of incense) to produce a sense of liveliness, or animation.

These luxury eikones became animated under the agitated light of flickering candles, whose flames were in turn stirred by drafts of air or human breath. Dense layers of fragrance and smoke from burning incense enveloped the icon, while polykandelia (metal disks with multiple oil lamps or candles) and wrought metal grilles cast lace shadows moving across its face. This luminous, umbral, and olfactory richness was enhanced by the reverberation of music and human prayer. The phenomenal changes affecting and reflected from the icon’s material layers activated the polymorphous appearances [emphasis added] of the eikon. In turn, these phenomenal transformations inundated the human senses to the point of saturation, arousing an internal agitation (pathema). Experiencing this pathema, the faithful projected their own psychological stirrings back onto the surfaces of the icon, seeing in the passing phenomenal changes, the shifting shadows and highlights, a manifestation of inner life, of indwelling spirit, transforming the inanimate object into empsychos (animate, inspired) graphe (Pentcheva, 2010: 1-2)

As this account suggests, the perception of the icon takes place in the space between the worshipper and the object of devotion. It cannot be telescoped into the gaze of the worshipper the way a painting might because the metal icon extends into the space between worshipper and object on account of being cast in bas-relief, whereas a painting recedes from the surface of the picture plane, thus creating the illusion of three-dimensionality in the mind’s eye (see Pentcheva, 2006: 539-40 and 2010: 5, 9) What is more, the experience of the icon was polysensory due to the performative aspects of its veneration. Thus, it engaged sight on account of the radiant colours of the glass and gemstones, the shimmering glitter of the metal, and the tremulous shadows cast by the flickering candles; hearing through the reverberation of voices joined in prayer or song; smell on account of the incense in which the icon was enveloped; touch through its variegated surfaces; and even taste on account of the worshipper “kissing” the icon, and partaking of the Eucharist: “Taste and ye shall see that the Lord is sweet” in the words of Psalm 33 (Fulton 2006). As Pentcheva (2010: 13 and 2006: 644) observes, the icon was perceived as animate or lifelike not on account of any sort of pictorial naturalism (that would be essentialist), nor its material properties (Ingold) but because of its “performance of shifting appearances.” On this account, the agency of the icon – and it is appropriate to speak of agency here, pace Ingold – is one of “dissemblance” through the saturation of the senses, rather than resemblance.
Pentcheva’s performative sensory analysis of the Byzantine relief icon is precious to us on account of her focus on the polysensory qualities of the materials from which it was wrought and her accent on the interplay (as opposed to interchangeability) of the senses. Pentcheva’s analysis is exceptionally fine, but it is not unique. Other excellent examples of a similarly high calibre attention to the exuberancy of materials include the late Nancy Munn’s account of the polysensory qualities of kula objects as “quali-signs of value” in *The Fame of Gawa* (1986; see also Howes 2003: chs. 3, 4); Fran Mascia-Lees’ (2011) exploration of the “aesthetic of attending” among latter day U.S. Arts and Crafts enthusiasts (artists and collectors alike); David Sutton’s (2010, 2014) highly productive concept of “gustemology” and detailed analysis of the intergenerational transmission of culinary wisdom on Mykynos; Constance Classen’s investigation of “experiencing art and collections” in *The Museum of the Senses* (2017); Anna Harris’ account of “ways of noticing” in *A Sensory Education* (2020); and, “The Senses: Design Beyond Vision” exhibition at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum and accompanying catalogue curated by Ellen Lupton and Andrea Lipps (2018). The latter exhibition is emblematic of the (multi)sensory revolution in design practice, and the eclipse of the (visual) formalism of High Modernism which that shift entailed (Metcalf, 2007; Jones, 2006). Thus, it no longer suffices for some consumer good to have “the right look,” as formerly: now it must also evince “the right sound,” “the right feel,” “the right scent,” etc., and, as an added touch, some element of “sensory surprise” or cross-modal noncorrespondence (see further Schifferstein and Wastiels, [2014] 2018; Howes, 2005a).

**On the pleasures of the senses**

There are two quotes from the works of Aristotle (Ingold’s butt) that I would like to put on the table. The first is from the *Metaphysics*

All men naturally desire knowledge. An indication of this is our esteem for the senses: for apart from their use we esteem them for their own sake, and most of all the sense of sight. Not only with a view to action but even when no action is contemplated …

(Aristotle, nd Book 1)

This quote is a good example of the “situatedness” of the subject: being Greek, and being a man, Aristotle was predisposed to valorize sight (see Boman, 1976 on the Greeks as “men of eyes”). Unfortunately, we do not know what Greek women thought, apart from the fragments that have come down to us from Sappho. (Despite being fragmentary, Sappho’s surviving lyrics still suggest a rather different orientation from Greek men: Carson, 1986). Note also what Aristotle says about the senses being valued “for their own sake.” This idea would be foreign to Gibson, and doubly foreign to Ingold the whole of whose writings concern “practical activity,” as we have seen.

The second quote is from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and has to do with pleasure:

That pleasure is produced in respect to each sense is plain; for we speak of sights and sounds as pleasant. It is also plain that it arises most of all when both the sense is at its best and it is active in reference to an object which corresponds (Aristotle, nd Book 10)
Thus, a person suffering from “a disease of the eye” could take no pleasure from a painting because their sight is not “at its best” Conversely, a poorly executed painting gives no pleasure even to one whose vision is 20/20. Note especially how Aristotle considers the senses not just as sources of knowledge or of practical know-how but also of pleasure. Incidentally, and again not surprisingly, Aristotle considered sight to be the most pleasing of the senses (being the most “complete”).

One more quote, again regarding the pleasures of the senses, but this time how they differ by vocation:

an activity is intensified by its proper pleasure since each class of things is better judged of and brought to precision by those who engage in the activity with pleasure; e.g. it is those who enjoy geometrical thinking that become geometers and grasp the various propositions better, and similarly, those who are fond of music or of building, and so on, make progress in their proper function by enjoying it; so the pleasures intensify the activities (Aristotle, nd Book 10)

And not only does pleasure “intensify” the activities, it also “completes life,” Aristotle says.

Where is the pleasure in Ingold’s account of the processes of building, making, etc.? There is no pleasure to be had, judging from his silence on this score. But just think of the smell of wood when you saw it (compare Ingold, 2011: ch. 4 – silence), or the colour of the brick – an ineffable yellow – that is used to build the stately homes of Southern Ontario (compare Ingold, 2013: 24-5, 47-59 – silence). What you find in Ingold is lots of discussion of the activity of sawing a plank of wood and making and laying bricks, but nary a word about the pleasures or aesthetics of doing so. All the “presence effects” (Pentcheva) and “ecstasies” (Bille, 2017; Böhme, 2017) have been abstracted and gone missing. Parenthetically, one material culture scholar who is very mindful of the senses and the pleasures of making is the architect-turned-anthropologist Trevor Marchand. Over the course of his career, he has trained his senses on and with the mud masons of Mali, the minaret builders of Yemen, and most recently, in The Pursuit of Pleasurable Work (2021), a community of woodworkers in London’s East End.

Ingold’s preferred mode of clinching his arguments in Making (as elsewhere) is by recourse to “experiments,” such as suggesting that the reader pick up a random stone, wet it, place it on their desk and contemplate it as they go on reading him (2011: ch. 2), or by marshalling the students in his “4As” class at the University of Aberdeen down to the beach and having them weave baskets (2013: ch. 2). There is certainly much pedagogical value to these experiments, but they are not ethnography. Besides, all of the subjects of his experiments tend to be W.E.I.R.D. (i.e. they hail from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic backgrounds), hence generic and interchangeable (for it is in the nature of students that they come and go).

In contrast to Ingold’s neutering of the individual, abstraction of the senses, dissolution of the distinction between qualities and properties, and apparent disregard for pleasure, the sensori-social approach to understanding the construction and
perception of things and other people shifts the onus onto the “emplacement” of the sensing subject and sensed object (Howes, 2005b: 7; Pink, 2009: 25; Hamilakis, 2014) – that is, their situatedness in a given tradition and a specific locale. (Compare the privileging of the wayfarer, a rootless being, in Ingold, 2011: 148-52). It holds that people are positioned differently – sensorially, socially – in accordance with the prevailing sensory regime. Their selection of materials,11 the manner in which they work them, and the way their creations are valued, are all conditioned by their social and sensory situation.

**Women’s craft for craft’s sake: priceless**

Take the example of the craftswoman (as distinct from Ingold’s craftsman). In “Feminine Tactics: Crafting an Alternative Aesthetics in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries” (2005), Constance Classen brings out how the decorative pursuits which were fashionable for upper class women of the period (e.g. needlework, shellwork, papercraft) involved making a virtue of necessity – or, rather, social pressure. All of these forms of “ladies’ work,” as they were known, are “intrinsically tactile, intimate and homely” (Classen 2005). This befitted the social conditioning of women’s senses according to the sensori-social division of labour. Men’s association with the higher, distance senses of sight and hearing fitted them for going out on voyages of discovery, for reading, painting, and for speaking in the House of Commons; women’s association with the lower, proximity senses of smell, touch and taste fitted them for the home – specifically, the nursery, bedroom and kitchen (Classen 1998).

Classen gives the example of the eighteenth century gentlewoman Mary Delany, who moved in the same circles as Jonathan Swift (one of her many admirers). Delany was renowned for her botanical illustrations. As Classen points out, Delany knew how to paint and could have painted the flowers, but chose to dedicate her energies to working with scissors instead. Delany’s flowers are built up from hundreds of carefully cut pieces of coloured paper glued on a black background. Being the eminently feminine creature she was and abjuring painting, this gentlewoman “excelled within the bounds of the socially permissible,” Classen (2005: 231) writes, and this fact was reflected in the richly textured, layered effect of the flowers she cut out, which were “readily accessible to the fingertips but … less immediately apparent to the eye.”

In the conclusion to “Feminine Tactics,” Classen (2005: 235) observes that ladies’ work was influenced by the visual arts, but it was “not simply a feminized version of art: it had its own repertoire of techniques, media and products and its own set of values.” Cardinal among those values was that a work possess tactile presence, not just visual appeal (e.g. the fineness of the scissorwork in the case of Delany’s paper cut-outs).12 Another key value that distinguished ladies’ work is that it was private and noncommercial. Indeed, it rarely left the home, and when it did it was in the form of gifts to female relatives and friends. In other words, such work was priceless. It transcended market value, unlike masculine craftwork, and unlike the so-called fine art of painting. It was craft for craft’s sake. We know these were intensely tactile activities. Did the tactility “intensify” the pleasure, and “complete life” for these ladies? These
are the sorts of questions the sensory historian or anthropologist would ask, but they are off Ingold’s radar.

**Femininity and differential geometry**

One very illuminating companion study to Classen’s “Feminine Tactics” is Ruth B. Phillips’ “Nuns, Ladies, and the ‘Queen of the Hurons’” (1999), a sociohistorical study of bark and fabric objects embroidered in dyed moosehair. This “fancywork,” as it was known, was taken over from Indigenous (Huron) female practitioners by nuns of the Ursuline order in eighteenth century New France (Québec) who in turn taught it to English or Euro-Canadian gentlewomen before it was reappropriated by the Huron matrons. This moosehair embroidery responded to the demand for “Indian” (and French Canadian) curios and so constituted an early form of tourist art in addition to becoming a suitable pastime for the housewives of the colonial elite (i.e. a means of socializing their sensibility). Of particular note is Phillips’ analysis of the aesthetics and iconography of these embroidered depictions of the “work-free” life of the “savage” (living in Edenic plenty) and the exotic picturesque.

One would be hard pressed to fit the analysis of this craftwork, which is so closely tied to feminine sensibilities not to mention processes of cultural cross-pollination/negotiation and transmission, within the strictures of Ingold’s theory of making. This lack of fit stems from Ingold’s theory being so naturalistic and mechanistic in orientation at once. For example, in “On weaving a basket,” Ingold lays bare the processes by which the form of an artefact “unfolds” within what he calls “a field of forces” through the application of force and the “skilled, sensuous engagement between the craftsman [presumably including craftsman] and his [presumably including her] raw material” (Ingold, 2000: 345, 350). That doesn’t sound very ladylike, since the female embroiderer’s touch was *delicate*. What is more, the materials were hardly “raw”: they were already part of the makers’ “nature” as women (according to a prior symbolic classification).

To go back to Classen’s crafty ladies: “Women were symbolically associated with the natural world and many of the materials they used in their craftwork, such as shells, feathers, hair and flowers, came from the natural world. They made their crafts with what they were” (2005: 234).

Ingold’s theory of basketmaking, etc., as “skilled, form-generating activity” sounds advanced when couched in the language of “morphogenetic fields” but how different is it really from Newtonian mechanics (with its stress on force, motion, etc.)? Likewise, Ingold’s (2000: ch. 19) invocation of such concepts as “sensory correction” and “sensuous engagement” sounds sensory, but his analysis lacks the finesse (never mind the semantics) of, for example, Classen’s haptics. This raises the question: Do not these terms (e.g. “sensory correction”) actually abstract the sensate and so function as “floating signifiers” (Lévi-Strauss, 1987: 55, 64) in Ingold’s work?

A more contemporary approach to making, which is both more abstract and more concrete than Ingold’s optic, is presented by Susanne Küchler (2014, 2017) in her analyses of the “prototypic artefacts” of Eastern Polynesia, such as stick charts for seafaring and, especially, the patchwork coverlets stitched together from scores and scores of precisely
measured and cut cloth known as *tivaivai*. The “informational surface” of these textiles encrypts and sustains knowledge of the highly complex genealogical system. This encoding is essential, since people may be living apart for most of their lives due to the prevailing patterns of inter-island migration.

To understand the work that goes into – and the inner workings of – these “additive materials” Küchler draws on differential geometry. This move is key, Küchler (2014: 386) avers, since these patchworks (with their stitches, folds, appliqués and intricate motifs) create “structures of internally held, manifold relations” that cannot be comprehended from the 1st person perspective of phenomenology, only from “a topological, 3rd person point of view of the world seen ‘in the round’.”

Considerations of space prevent me from expanding further on all the ways in which Küchler’s approach to the study of how these patchworks work takes us beyond phenomenology, beyond Newtonian (and Ingoldian) mechanics, and beyond Ingold’s philosophy of linealogy to join up with two directions for research first introduced by Lévi-Strauss: the use of computing to model structures of kinship and “the science of the concrete.” Suffice it to say that Küchler’s enucleation of “the abstract and yet concretized logic manifest in these artefacts” is fancywork indeed.

**Conclusion**

I doubt there is anyone who has read Ingold’s work more closely and carefully than have I. This is because I was genuinely concerned to find out whether his critique of the anthropology of the senses (Ingold, 2000: ch. 14) has any merit. Had I found that his critique was warranted, I too would have gone and taken up “dwelling” in Ingold’s “world of materials,” I would have started honing my perceptual “skills,” forgotten about the “transmission” of culture by material means, and learned to “pay attention” to the environment the way he bids us do. Life would have been so much simpler and “affordable” then, if also a lot less pleasurable. But I did not, for the single most important lesson I have learned from practicing anthropology with and of the senses is that it is the “wisdom of the senses” (Classen, 1999) in all their cross-cultural multiplicity and volatility that ought to concern us first, and last. The approach advocated here rejects the instrumentalization of the senses, which is to say their reduction to means of information pick-up in an environment (à la Ingold after Gibson). Furthermore, to Ingold’s account of “being alive,” this article opposes “the life of the senses,” and to his “experiments” this paper opposes ethnography, following François Laplantine’s definition in *The Life of the Senses*: “The experience of [ethnographic] fieldwork is an experience of sharing in the sensible [partage du sensible]. We observe, we listen, we speak with others, we partake of their cuisine, we try to feel along with them what they experience” (Laplantine, 2015: 2). In other words, it is by sensing and making sense along with others that the material world comes alive for us.

The anthropology and archaeology of the senses have continued to expand even in the face of Ingold’s critique, and his polarization of materials and materiality has been superseded by many fine-grained analyses of the material immateriality of the sensory aspects of objects. The latter approach – namely, attending to the sensori-social life of things
involves fleshing out the relations between the senses, and between people, and the products of their labour. The resulting understanding is “ecstatic” (Böhme, 2017; Bille, 2017) and at the same time highlights the constraints along gender, racialized and class lines that become embedded in the sensate through “material activities” (Coupaye). The form is not the thing, but rather all the “subtle connections” (Miller) that its qualities body forth.

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Notes
1. Ingold’s definition of culture as consisting of “concepts and categories” is rather thin. Most social anthropologists would include practices (after Bourdieu 1977), and sensory anthropologists, in particular, would conceive of cultures as “ways of sensing” that underpin and also render sensible the concepts and categories (Howes and Classen 1991: 257; Classen 1993, 1997, 1998, 2017; Howes and Classen 2014).
2. “... and for that matter also with gustation and olfaction,” Ingold (in Ingold and Howes 2011: 314) continues, though he has yet to present any evidence in support of this claim.
3. Or, try reading all that Ingold has to say about breathing as the alternation of inhalation and exhalation (see Ingold 2015: 66-8) while listening to I Can’t Breathe by H.E.R., a song in memory of George Floyd.
4. Around 2011, Ingold changed his tack. Instead of dressing the social down to ecology, he started dressing it up as mentality. Thus, after alluding to the extended mind hypothesis (the brainchild of philosopher Andy Clarke), he writes: “I invoke the word ‘social’ to signify this understanding of the essential interpenetrability or commingling of mind and world” (Ingold 2011: 236 emphasis added). This extreme mentalism is not helpful. Granted Descartes erred when he called away his senses and locked the cogito inside his head (in addition to relegating it to another, higher plane of existence). However, the extended mind (or
“leaky brain”) hypothesis is just as mental: it merely turns the inside out. The mind should be put back in its place. What we really need is a theory of the extended sensorium.

5. For a contemporary restatement of the Boasian position see “Sound Studies without Auditory Culture” (Kane [2015] 2018).

6. As one of the anonymous reviewers of this article observed, while Ingold’s “theoretical extremism and rejection of the symbolic” are objectionable, it is still “possible to note that Ingold treats humans and the environment as participants in a relationship of emergent meaning whose capacities are enabled, inhibited, and educated by the (changing) properties of materials in a process of mutual construction” (emphasis added). Indeed, and perhaps this is what his acolytes are latching on to. Perhaps. But the word “construction” is not part of Ingold’s vocabulary, and his account of “meaning” is beguiling: for example, when, in a disingenuous act of ventriloquism, Ingold (2013: 31) refers to materials as “speaking,” we have to ask: Whose talking?

7. Carl Knappett, who was in on the initial debate, already pointed out how to resolve it in “Materials with materiality?” (2007). Interestingly, elsewhere (Knappett, 2004), he is highly critical of Gibson’s ecological reductionism. All the present analysis adds to Knappett’s outlook is a heightened focus on the material immateriality of the senses and sensuousness, or mediation of sensation. See further Hunter-Crawley and O’Brien 2019.

8. There is a whiff of Calvinism to this suppression or elision of sensual pleasure. This absence is consistent with the emphasis, throughout Ingold’s work, on “practical activity” or vocational training, and “going about one’s business.” There is no time to be idle, no time to reflect – and Ingold is equally impatient with those who would ogle images. All this smacks of Calvinism. As suggested elsewhere, with Ingold its back to the Reformation (Howes 2019; Milner 2011).

9. Abstraction of the senses? To elaborate, perhaps partly because he was stung by the present writer’s barbs, but also for reasons of his own, Ingold’s writings from 2011 on have considerably more to say about the particularities of the senses (not just their interchangeability) than formerly. However, when he is not reflecting on his own senses in action during one of his “experiments,” such as sawing a plank of wood (Ingold, 2011: ch. 4) it is to the philosophers Deleuze and Guattari that he turns for his ideas about how the senses work. But experiment and continental philosophy are no substitute for ethnography – especially sensory ethnography (Rhys-Taylor, 2017; Harris, 2020) and sensory history (Classen, 2014). In my estimation, the former leads to introspective abstraction (mind folded in on itself), whereas the latter opens the way to the encounter with alterity and cultivating the capacity to be “of two sensoria” (Howes, 2003:28), hence of more than one mind about things.

10. Unless you would consider the passing reference to one stroke being “more comfortable” than another, and the fleeting reference to one phase being more “relaxed” than another in Ingold’s chapter on using a handsaw to cut a plank of wood (Ingold 2011: 55) to constitute an aesthetic discourse on pleasure. That seems rather thin. At the same time, I am sure Ingold derives immense pleasure from playing his cello, and he should start by theorizing that. Gibson won’t be of any use to him, but Aristotle might. He will also need to discard the idea that he is engaging in some sort of “skilled practice”: cello-playing is an art! (see Abrahamson 2020).

11. On this matter of the selection of materials see Were (2013: 583), who rightly observes that Ingold’s “special emphasis on weaving as a process of world-making is at the expense of any understanding of how a basket-maker selects materials for weaving” in the first place.

12. See further Classen’s (2005) discussion of how the visual is given a tactile presence in the design and decoration of A la Ronde, the house the Parminter cousins, Jane and Mary, built in Exmouth.
13. To bring this discussion back from history to anthropology: with the Melanesianist Ludovic Coupaye (2018: 14) we would ask: “What can material activities tell us about indigenous conceptions of life?” followed by: How does the answer to this question contrast with Ingold’s notion of practical activity (or “enskillment”) and Ingold’s own conception of life? Coupaye’s approach is noteworthy for its emphasis on the aesthetic, on efficacy (magical or otherwise), on the sequence of actions (and sensations), on image-making, on vernacular logics, and on their interrelationships. The senses are not “interchangeable” for him, and “life” is susceptible of many different constructions.

14. “Naturalistic” in the sense that Ingold, with his eye for the “ecological equation,” in his chapter “On weaving a basket” goes so far as to assimilates the looping techniques of the Telefol girl fashioning a netbag to the behaviour of the male weaverbird building a nest (Ingold 2000: 354-61).

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