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Speak, Materials! Language, Matter, and the Historicity of Materiality Concepts

Every artist, conservator, art historian, or chemist knows that one material is not the other. Yet, the generic terminology we use to diversify one of the largest possible container terms our language offers ('material') suggests otherwise. A more refined material language could foster a higher awareness of the complex and composite nature of materials. Such a language would capture and relate chemical formula, idiosyncratic behavior in particular historical and geographical settings, as well as the role of materials in the biography of the individual art work. Paradoxically, theories of materiality, in particular new materialist theories, seem to work against such specifications by generalizing materials into matter that has agency or is alive. Yet while it is easy to point out the anthropocentric blind spot of new materialism, its bold claims have also helped to push materials back into a theoretical discourse in the first place. In order to move the field beyond a potential theoretical impasse, we need to acknowledge the religious nature of materiality debates and open up towards the radical specificity of materials. Only then can we develop terminologies that describe the role of materials in the making and re-making of art and can be used by all those engaged in the endeavor.