



Following
the Materials

A conversation
with Walter Oltmann

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This conversation took place on 18 August 2022, in the lead up to Walter Oltmann's residency and exhibition at the Villa-Legodi Centre for Sculpture (10 December – 31 January 2023).

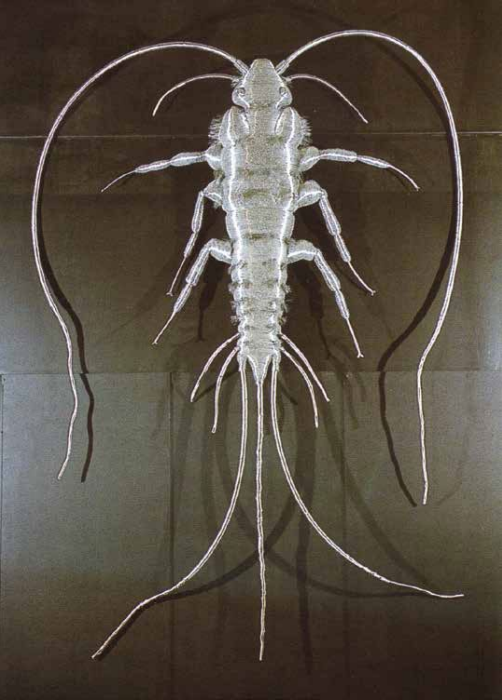


Walter Oltmann, *Chrysalis*, 2007, Anodised aluminium wire, 240 x 74 x 50 cm. Private collection. Photo: John Hodgkiss. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery.

Sven Christian [SC]: So the purpose of this chat is to talk about your practice and methodology, and to continue our conversations about the work you're planning to do at the Centre, so that we can continue developing the exhibitions and publication. When we first spoke, we discussed inviting different artists who work in a similar mode to talk with you about their methodology, as a way of thinking about how different artists employ similar techniques, but to varying ends. This idea stemmed from reading your thesis, "In the Weave" (2017), and your reading of material and process in the practices of artists like Andries Botha, Nicholas Hlobo, and Siemon Allen, in particular weaving / unweaving. One writer who comes up a lot is Tim Ingold: this idea of the 'ongoing generative movement' and of 'following the materials.' Maybe we can start there...

Walter Oltmann [WO]: When I started the PhD I had little idea where it would go. I began by trying to identify people whose work I was interested in. Anita Nettleton,

my supervisor, suggested that I jump in by describing what I do in my own art practice, and from there see how it feeds into discussions of other peoples' works. She suggested Ingold's writing, but it wasn't only him. I read a lot on craft. Richard Sennett's *The Craftsman* was an important source and Glenn Adamson's writings were also influential. He writes a lot about contemporary craft and traces its origins in *Thinking Through Craft* (2007) and *The Invention of Craft* (2013). He also put together a comprehensive anthology of texts on craft in *The Craft Reader* (2010). Alfred Gell's book *Art and Agency* (1998) was also an important text to read. So to start, I read a lot of texts relating to making and materials, testing the water to see where it might go. Anita must have been quite frustrated initially, because my writing went in all sorts of directions. For my purposes, Ingold eventually seemed to be the most pertinent. He deals with the art of making, specifically as a weaving-based form of making. Then he discusses the 'ongoing generative movement' and that kind of thing.



LEFT: Walter Oltmann, *Silverfish*, 1997. Aluminium wire, 300 x 200 x 30 cm. Johannesburg Art Gallery. Photo: Bob Cnoops; RIGHT: Walter Oltmann, *Carpet Piece*, 1983. Galvanised steel wire and soapstone, 16 x 108 x 102 cm. Wits Art Museum collection. Photo: Mark Lewis. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery

SC: I'm interested in how this methodical, repetitive action — weaving — can be generative. There's also this sense in your work — in its reference to cocoons, exoskeletons, and so on — that nothing is ever quite as it is, or that everything is always in a process of becoming. Which isn't necessarily about growth. It could also be about the process of forgetting. How does this relate to the idea of 'following the materials'?

WO: My early student explorations in clay were about forming vessels — the idea of coiling and hand-building vessels. You follow forms, and that led to working with wire; to coil and create husks and hollow shapes that suggest themselves as cocoon forms — things that might be inhabited, or that morph and transform. Weaving in wire sparked an interest in creatures that do that, like insects in different stages of development. But as you saw in my writing, the very early works looked at wire gabion structures filled with rocks. Those were very different. I moved away from the very heavy, stone-filled forms towards weaving in wire in its own right, as a form of making that suggests itself.

SC: But even in those early works like *Carpet Piece* (1983), one can see the links to later works like *Silverfish* (1997), be it through its references to erosion or domesticity. Even though they're very different, there's a thread. There also seems to be a connection between those drawings you were showing me — *Husk I, II, and III* (2001) — of those bramble or thorn-like suits, those plants that stick to you.¹ They're not repulsive in the same way as silverfish, but they're annoying. They cling to you and are hard to brush off. At the same time, they're seeds. They "want" to be carried. So I'm quite drawn to thinking about your work in terms of labour. Particularly the kinds of labour described by Hannah Arendt — the labour of the body versus the work of the hand, but also labour as a metabolic or reproductive process. Birth, death, and so on. I'm wondering how this might relate to your process, in particular your work in wire?

WO: Wire for me has always been a very direct form of making. If I'd stuck to clay, I would've needed to invest in a kiln, glazing... There are all these steps. With wire you get a result very quickly. The forming process is

much more upfront. I can make decisions and change things as I go, so it's very process-driven: you make a bend and the bend is immediately captured in the wire. It then grows through successive layers of weaving, so the growth aspect is immediate. That attracted me. It's also why I find bronze a little foreign. I've played with it here and there on a small scale, but I'm still not sure. It's a bit like the clay thing. You have to go through certain processes after you've made something — the forming of the mould, the casting, and so on. Only then do you arrive at something. It's much more delayed.

SC: Is it the delay in result that gets you? Would you feel the same about printmaking, for example?

WO: Printmaking is a bit like the bronze casting in some ways. You draw something, then it has to go through certain stages. With etching, you then need to dip it into acid and see what that gives you, then carry on drawing on the plate... I'm not averse to that. It can be good to do something outside of your comfort zone, something that makes you think in stages. I actually enjoy the printmaking process because it takes me out of that immediacy of drawing and weaving. Bronze can do that too, but because it's very expensive, it feels less explorative, I suppose. You have to know in advance what you want to do. Even though I have an idea when I begin working with wire, the medium allows me to grow and change and evolve. There's much more fluidity for me in that way of working.

SC: So there's something about the premeditated aspect of bronze that feels limiting for you?

WO: It's just different. I didn't make those three drawings with the idea of making bronzes, but when I had them on my show, I spoke to Neil [Dundas] and said, 'You know, these actually

could become bronzes.' I'm not sure I will, but we'll see.

SC: Does the repetitive nature of your practice extend beyond the making of a single work? Like if you're working, there's obviously an acquired knowledge that comes with the process. It becomes like motor memory, but its translation from one work to another... I'm wondering if you think of your works individually, or if you view them as part of a larger whole?

WO: In a way, one work does lead to the next. For example, *Silverfish* sparked the *Carapax (Zygen)* (2021) sculpture that I had on my recent show. So I revisit certain things, feed off them, but also build on them, pushing the work into new terrain. I don't always know what I'm doing or where it might take me, but it's not so open-ended that I just allow the process to do its own thing. It was interesting to look at Chris Soal's work in that sense, because his abstract way of working with toothpicks seems quite open-ended. I still need to ask him about this, but I think he works with polyurethane foam. It's a substance that you mix chemically and it swells. So it's a fluid that you pour, and then it becomes a frothy form that flows along. That then becomes the substrate for his toothpicks to be inserted, I think. But that initial flow is a generative thing. It makes something that is not so controlled, which is somewhat different to what I do. For me, the weaving is a sequential, slow accretion which I control.

SC: I'm thinking about control now, specifically in your "figurative" works. They have a sentinel aspect to them, like those guards outside Buckingham Palace.

WO: Yes, and you need to have some sense of proportion to do that. I've often made a head thinking it will become a small figure, but then it's too large, so the scale of the whole shifts. It's intuitive, but you have to monitor where it's



Walter Oltmann, *Carapax (Zygen)*, 2021. Anodised aluminium wire, 230 x 140 x 38 cm. Photo: Anthea Pokroy. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery.

going and make adjustments accordingly. Very often things don't turn out how I imagined. Then I have to step back and say, 'Ok, do I need to cut this off entirely, or adjust the scale?' Those decisions happen in the flow as well.

SC: Are you a chess player, by any chance?

WO: No, not at all. [Laughs] Why?

SC: Well I feel that's how you play chess. There are certain moves you make. Then you realise that you've made a mistake and you have to adapt.

WO: Yes, I see what you mean. You have to step back and look and decide before you act...

SC: But at what point do you make the call

to say that you're going to continue in one direction or backtrack?

WO: I don't normally unweave. It's a heck of a thing to try and undo something, so if a figure is going a bit awry, I either chop off a piece and carry on or I cut into the wire, pull it together, and stitch it. So there are some things I can do to adjust if it goes wrong, but yes, it's a bit risky, because you need to decide its scale and proportions at the outset. Those steps have to be anticipated and brought into the making, but it doesn't always go according to plan. It all depends on what you're making. With figures I have to be quite attentive to their proportions. With the wall pieces it's easier to pre-plan with a sketch on a big brown piece of paper. But those are more sketches than drawings, outlines of what I want to do, like templates.

SC: Do you often make drawings before you sculpt?

WO: Not normally. I might make a sketch of something to clarify what it might become, but I don't usually make a drawing and then decide that's what I want to do, except for this bronze thing. I tend to draw after the fact. I've made a sculpture and that might spark an idea for a drawing.

SC: At your house I noticed two legs — it looked like you were sculpting in sections, with the intent to stick them all together when you're done?

WO: When I do figures I usually start with the head. Well, the shoulders, then the head. I then weave from the shoulders down into the torso and into the legs. So it goes the other way around. I don't think I've ever started with the legs, strangely enough, but I could easily have done that. Somehow the forming of the torso allows me to develop the figure more easily. They're kind of suits, rather than figures. It's more like a skin around the figure; a suit that the figure can fit into. So it's not as detailed as a figure would be — I'm not weaving all the fingers and toes. But talking about limitations, I often find that wire tells me I can't do certain things. I was thinking of making one of these drawn seed-pod suits in wire, for example, and noticed very quickly that it wasn't going the way it should. The scale wasn't allowing me that kind of detail. If I were to make it much bigger it might. I made the bodice and then tried to weave those sharp, claw-like forms onto it. Then I realised that they needed to be much more robust, because I always need to work on the front, back, and sides. When you weave something on the front and turn it over, it has to lie on whatever you've done. If it's not sturdy it'll collapse. So it becomes very complicated to handle and it gets squashed and doesn't quite do what you want it to do.

I'd need to find other ways to stabilise it. So the wire has its limitations. It's not like bronze, which is hard. You can lie bronze on those claw bits. It won't damage them. But when you do that with wire it starts to bend and crumple.

SC: So has your thinking about the work you want to make as part of your award shifted from those brambly suits or seed pods?

WO: Yes. I made two smaller figures and thought I could use one of them to do something similar, by creating pockets where I could attach bristles, like I've done quite often. I'm going back to what I've done before, to see if I can bring in something new with that method. So I'm not crossing that idea off and saying never again. I just need to find a way of doing it better, maybe by increasing the scale. I'll have to see. When I think of that big space at the Centre, I want to create something that doesn't get swallowed up by it. I do have some works that are slightly taller than me, so they are quite big already, but maybe I need to think larger as well. Not enormous, but something that can hold its own in that space. I'm always drawn to artists who work in clay, and there are quite a few contemporary ceramicists who work large scale. Something about the unusually large scale for ceramics captures my attention, so looking at people like Jun Kaneko and Matt Wedel, an American. He does enormous works in clay, very colourful. So I'm trying to find a way into that kind of approach. I'm also imagining that people who come to see my work will also want to see work-in-progress, rather than just finished objects.

SC: It's notable that you're thinking about the space as constitutive of the work, to some extent. Not only in terms of what the work is, but its inside-out quality. I guess the space becomes really important. You mentioned an alternative to making these thorn-type structures



Walter Oltmann, *Husk I - III*, 2001. Oil paint, gold foil and oil pastel on paper, 110 x 75 cm (each). Photo: Anthea Pokroy. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery.

— from what I understand it sounds like they would function as clip-ons or adornments that you attach?

WO: Yes. It's a process of finding the right way into it; what will work, what won't. One artist whose works really fascinate me is Tony Cragg. His sculptures and drawings speak to each other. They're very fluid things, but quite large. They hold the space. Every time I look at them I get goosebumps. When he talks about his work, it's very much a process of figuring out where something will go. His work is mostly bronze-based, quite abstract, but there are figurative elements to them, hidden within the form. And quite a lot of the forms are perforated — they're solid forms, but sometimes they're hollow. I quite like the idea of the bronze as this hollow thing. Bronzes are hollow, even if they don't look like it. Some of Cragg's sculptures are very highly polished, like Anish Kapoor's large bean-shaped work in Chicago, which has a mirror-like surface. At other times he colours them, and there's a particular way of colouring bronzes that makes them these very bright, flashy things.

SC: What is it that attracts you to the hollow?

WO: Clearly, the hollow in my work comes from the weaving. But when I first realised that bronzes were just three millimetres thick, like hollow shells... I suppose I thought if I had to do a bronze it would have to show itself as being hollow. So these three figures, if I make them, would do that. The face would be empty.

SC: But why do you feel the need to show that it's hollow?

WO: Oh [Laughs]. That's a good question. I don't know. There's something about the fact that a bronze *is* hollow. When you see a traditional bronze sculpture, it doesn't show itself as hollow. It shows itself as a solid thing — very black, very dark, very imposing. Maybe the hollow says something about the process of it, the way it's made; that it's actually a skin-like thing. It's not completely filled out. I've always been attracted to things like that.

SC: I think there's also something to be said for vulnerability in this context; if something is hard and fast, if it presents itself as fact and doesn't quite allow for doubt, it can feel like a bit of an affront.



Walter Oltmann, *Caterpillar Suit II*, 2007. Aluminium wire, 120 x 110 x 68 cm, Private collection. Photo: John Hodgkiss. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery.

WO: Yes. It also has to do with the fact that I've always worked with these husk-like things. The hollow, shell-like form is part of my language. But as you say, it suggests vulnerability.

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