The very notion of material culture, which has gained a new momentum following its long hibernation in the basements of museology, rests on the premise that as the embodiments of mental representations, or as stable elements in systems of signification, objects have already solidified or precipitated out from the generative fluxes of the medium that gave birth to them. Convinced that *all that is material resides in things*, or in what Bjornar Olsen (2003) calls ‘the hard physicality of the world’, students of material culture have contrived to dematerialize, or to sublimate into thought, the very medium in which the things in question once took shape and are now immersed. (23)

But has touching this particular stone put you in touch with *the materiality of the world?* Is there nothing material that is not locked up in solid, tangible objects like stones? Are we really to believe that whatever lies on the hither side of such objects is immaterial, including the very air that affords the freedom of movement enabling you to reach out and touch them, not to mention the finger itself – and, by extension, the rest of the body…Gibson’s whole point was that the surface separates one kind of material (e.g. stone) from another (e.g. air), rather than materiality from immateriality. It is precisely because of this emphasis on materials that Gibson downplays any notion of the materiality of the world.

Imagine you were a burrowing animal like a mole. Your world would consist of corridors and chambers rather than artefacts and monuments. It would be a world of enclosures whose surfaces surround the medium instead of *detached objects* whose surfaces are surrounded by it (Gibson 1979:34)…They would insist that the materiality of the world is not culturally constructed but culturally excavated…This example is not entirely fanciful, for in many parts of the world (e.g. China)…humans have set up house in caves…But whereas the house-builder erects an edifice, a monument to his labour, by the time the cave is finished all that seems to have been created is an unfurnished volume…There must be something wrong with a way thinking that forces us to treat only one half of the house positively as a material object, and the other negatively as a hole in the ground. (23–4)

The source of the problem lies, once again, in the slippage from materials to materiality. It is this that leads us to suppose that human beings, as they go in and out of doors, live alternately on the inside and on the outside of a material world. It is as though this world were a Swiss cheese, full of holes yet nevertheless contained within the envelope of its outward surfaces. In the real world of materials, however, there are neither interior holes not exterior surfaces. Of course there are surfaces of all sorts…but these surfaces, as Gibson showed, are interfaces between one kind of material and another (e.g. rock and air), not between what is material and what is not.
Like all other creatures, human beings do not exist on the ‘other side’ of materiality, but swim in an ocean of materials. Once we acknowledge our immersion, what this ocean reveals to us is not the bland homogeneity of different shades of matter but a flux in which materials of the most diverse kinds, through processes of admixture and distillation, of coagulation and dispersal, and of evaporation and precipitation, undergo continual generation and transformation. (24)

Now so long as our focus is on the materiality of objects, it is quite impossible to follow the multiple trails of growth and transformation converge, for instance, in the stuccoed façade of a building or the page of a manuscript. These trails are merely swept under the carpet of a generalised substrate upon which the forms of all things are said to be imposed or inscribed. In urging that we take a step back, from the materiality of objects to the properties of materials, I propose that we lift the carpet, to reveal beneath its surface a tangled web of meandrine complexity, in which the secretions of gall wasps get caught up with old iron, hens and bees, etc. For materials such as these do not present themselves a tokens of some common essence – materiality – rather they partake in the very processes of the world’s ongoing generation and regeneration, of which things such as manuscripts or house-fronts are impermanent by-products. (26)

In this regard, it is significant that studies of so-called material culture have focused overwhelmingly on processes of consumption rather than production (Miller 1995; 1998). Such studies take as their starting point a world of objects that has, as it were, already crystallized out from the fluxes of materials and their transformations. At this point materials appear to vanish, swallowed up by the very objects to which they have given birth…Thenceforth it is the objects themselves that capture our attention, no longer the materials of which they are made. It is as though our material involvement begins only when the stucco has already hardened on the house-front or the ink already dried on the page. We see the building and not the plaster of the walls; the words and not the ink.

In reality, of course, the materials are still there and continue to mingle and react as they had always done, forever threatening the things they comprise with dissolution or even ‘dematerialisation’. Plaster can crumble and ink can fade. (26)

In the world of solid objects envisaged by material culture theorists, however, the flux of materials is stifled and stilled. In such a world, wherein all that is material is locked up in things, it would be impossible to breath. Indeed neither life itself, nor any form of consciousness that depends on it, could persist.

Suffocated by the dead hand of materiality…the material world can only be brought back to life in the dreams of theorists by conjuring a magical mind-dust that, sprinkled among its constituents, is supposed to set them physically in motion. It has come to be known in the literature as agency…

Pels characterises the logic of this argument as animist: ‘a way of saying that things are alive because they are animated by something foreign to them, a soul or…spirit made to reside in matter’ (1998:94). Whatever its source…this animating principle is understood to be additional to the material object.
Pels counters this with another way of understanding how things can act back. This is to say that the spirit that enlivens them is not in but of matter. We do not look beyond the material constitution of objects in order to discover what makes them tick; rather the power of agency lies with their materiality itself – what Pels characterises as *fetishist*. Thus the fetish is an object that, by virtue of its sheer material presence, affects the course of affairs (1998:94-5).

This argument is an important first step, but doesn’t go far enough. It acknowledges the active power of materials, their capacity to stand forth from the things made of them, yet it remains trapped in a discourse that opposes the mental and the material, and cannot therefore countenance the properties of materials, save as aspects of the inherent materiality of objects. Thus the hybrid quality that Pels attributes to the fetish – its capacity at once to set up and disrupt ‘the sensuous border zone between ourselves and the things around us, between mind and matter (102), is in fact a product of the misrecognition of the active properties of materials as a power of the materiality of objects. (28)

Bring things to life is not a matter of adding to them a sprinkling of agency but of restoring them to the generative fluxes of the world of materials in which they came into beings and continue to subsist. This view, that things are in life rather than life in things, is diametrically opposed to the conventional understanding of animism (invoked by Pels 1998:94 and drawn from Tylor), which entails the attribution of life, spirit or agency to objects that are ‘really just’ inert. It is, however, entirely consistent with the actual ontological commitments of peoples often credited in the literature with an animistic cosmology.

In their world there are no objects as such. Things are alive and active not because they are possessed of spirit – whether in or of matter – but because the substances of which they are comprised continue to be swept up in circulations of the surrounding media that alternately portend their dissolution or – characteristically with animate beings – ensure their regeneration. Spirit is the regenerative power of these circulatory flows which, in living organisms, are bound into tightly woven bundles or tissues of extraordinary complexity. All organisms are bundles of this kind. Stripped of the veneer of materiality they are revealed not as quiescent objects but as hives of activity, pulsing with the flows of materials that keep them alive. And in this respect human beings are no exception. They are, in the first place, organisms, not blobs of solid matter with an added whiff of mentality or agency to liven them up. As such, they are born and grow within the current of materials, and participate from within in their further transformation. (28-9)

Following Gibson, I have chosen to concentrate not on matter as such, but instead on substances and media, and the surfaces between them. These are the basic components, not of the physical or material world but of the environment. Whereas the physical world exists in and for itself, the environment is a world that continually unfolds in relation to the beings that make a living there. Its reality is not of material objects but for its inhabitants. It is, in short, a world of materials. And as the environment unfolds, so the materials of which it is comprised do not exist – like the objects of the material world – but occur.
Thus the properties of materials, regarded as constituents of an environment, cannot be identified as fixed, essential attributes of things, but are rather processual and relational. They are neither objectively determined nor subjectively imagined but practically experienced. In that sense, every property is a condensed story. To describe the properties of materials is to tell the stories of what happens to them as they flow, mix and mutate.

In speaking of the world of materials, rather than the material world, my purpose has been to escape from this oscillation, both by returning persons to where they belong, within the continuum of organic life, and by recognising that this life itself undergoes continual generation in currents of materials.

Considered as a constituent of the material world, a stone is indeed both a lump of matter than can be analysed for its physical properties and an object whose significance is drawn from its incorporation into the context of human affairs. The concept of materiality, as we have seen, reproduces this duality, rather than challenging it. But in the world of materials, humans figure as much within the context for stone as do stones within the context for humans. And these contexts, far from lying on disparate levels of being, respectively social and natural, are established as overlapping regions of the same world. It is not as though this world were on of brute physicality, of mere matter, until people appeared on the scene to give it form and meaning. Stones, too, have histories, forged in ongoing relations with surrounding that may or may not include human beings. It is all very well to place stoner within the context of human social life and history, but within what context do we place this social life and history if not the ever-unfolding world of materials in which the very being of humans, along with that of nonhumans they encounter, is bound up?

My plea, in arguing for a return to this world, is simply that we should once more take materials seriously, since it is from them that everything is made. (31)