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Questions & Answers : New Materialism, Old Media

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2017

<https://doi.org/10.25595/1558>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hofer, Kristina Pia; Stockburger, Axel: *Questions & Answers : New Materialism, Old Media*, in: FKW : Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und visuelle Kultur (2017) Nr. 61, 16-29. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25595/1558>.

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QUESTIONS & ANSWERS: NEW MATERIALISM, OLD MEDIA

Kristina Pia Hofer: Axel, let me jump right into the topic with you: what is the significance of new materialist frameworks, and especially new feminist materialist frames, in the world of contemporary art? As is known, the recent materialist turn in feminist thinking is strongly influenced by a specific field in feminist theory, namely, by feminist science and technology studies (STS).¹⁾ But as critics like Sara Ahmed have pointed out,²⁾ taking materialities seriously as components that influence social and political dynamics – and also the way that these dynamics are represented in public discourses – is not new within this specific field. The field already has a long history stretching right into the 1980s, where we have big names like Donna Haraway, for instance. Here, however, the interest in materiality targets very specific contexts, like the relation between medical technologies and the human, biological, anatomical body, or the “traffic,” as Haraway calls it, between nature and culture that necessarily takes place in modern (techno-) science.³⁾ But I wonder how these lines of thinking impact upon the arts, the dynamics of which strike me as somewhat different.

Axel Stockburger: For me it was incredibly interesting to see that certain aspects of this perspective overlap with Deleuze and Guattari’s work, especially with their notion of assemblage (*agencement*).⁴⁾ It can also be found in the field of the critique of science, with actor-network theory, both Bruno Latour’s and Isabelle Stengers’s work, and then it seems to appear in lots of different guises in the last 10 years. While you are focusing on a particular feminist position, elements of new materialism simultaneously come to the fore with the rise of speculative realism and what corresponds to it in terms of object-oriented ontology. So my first question was what these different areas of thought share in relation to our subject. I think one crucial aspect is that they all focus on relationality. That’s definitely something they all address in their own particular ways; they emphasize or focus on relations between a whole range of different entities and change the conceptual landscape insofar as they are keen to decenter human subjectivity by highlighting its embeddedness in complex assemblages with other entities. We can also find this in Karen Barad’s or in Bruno Latour’s perspective. A second shared element appears to be the focus on the unstable, the dynamic and the fluid, which

1)
See, for instance, Barad, Karen (2007): *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press; Coole, Diana and Frost, Samantha (2010): *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

2)
Ahmed, Sara (2008): *Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the “New Materialism.”* In: *European Journal of Women’s Studies*. Vol. 15, issue 1, pp. 23-39.

3)
Haraway, Donna (1989): *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science*. London, New York: Routledge, p. 377.

4)
See: Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Félix (1980): *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

appears time and again. In the world of quantum physics, matter has lost its air of stability and inertness. In a certain sense one is reminded of the scientific metaphor of the “aether,”⁵⁾ which was considered such an important medium in nineteenth century science. I am thinking of this because a lot of the language in new materialist perspectives metaphorically points towards the fluid and dynamic: that which is *in-between*.

KPH: (laughs) Sure, on the one hand one is reminded of historical scientific concepts like aether – the idea that there is sort of an intangible fluid connecting all the different natural, human and divine components interacting in processes of world-making. After all, the concern most new materialist accounts share is pointing out the ways different components – animate and inanimate, cultural and natural, organic and inorganic, human and other – are in fact entangled, and interacting with each other in all phenomena that constitute our empirical world. On the other hand, what present materialisms are invested in is not just describing such fluidity, or defining a missing element connecting the different actors in the world, but rather in redefining the notion of the agent or actor itself. The common notion of an agent – in Western thought since at least the Enlightenment – would be to posit the agent as a person, a subject imbued with a consciousness, a will and a power to act. Karen Barad expands upon this notion of the agent, and suggests agency as something that can be asserted by everything that has a presence in particular phenomena in the empirical world – ranging from sea creatures like the brittle star to lab equipment, for example.

AS: Of course, the aim of these positions is to a certain extent to deconstruct, to open up, or to transform a very specific conception of dualism between spirit and matter, which can be found at the core of Western forms of subject constitution: the Cartesian subject with its distinction between mind/spirit and body/matter, or Kant’s political subject that emerges during the Enlightenment. In this tradition, subject formation and political thought are always based on practices of distinction, classification and exclusion. The introduction of universal laws for political subjects is based on these modes of separation. A critical approach towards these forms of splitting domains, of defining binaries, of keeping matter and mind in separate spheres, is present in all flavors of new materialism.

KPH: Talking about dismantling binaries: this has been a crucial concern in all sorts of feminist approaches to art and popular culture for many decades now. Feminist film studies, for instance,

5)

Kümmel-Schnur, Albert and Schröter, Jens (eds.) (2008): *Äther – Ein Medium der Moderne*. Bielefeld: Transcript.

has been enormously invested in laying bare how such binaries are staged, performed and reified in the cinema – cinema in the broad sense of the term, which includes the film as a semiotic text as well as the theater as a social, architectural space, and also the apparatus as a physical assemblage of technologies. Not to forget the filmmakers/audiences/stars as social agents. In my experience, trying to discuss new materialist ideas in these contexts can run the risk of being misunderstood as deliberate provocation. I am often asked what, exactly, is so very new about calling attention to the role that material components, like the sonic texture of a particular copy of a late 1960s exploitation film, play in dynamics of meaning-making.⁶⁾ I am often told that the binaries I seek to dismantle have all been sufficiently addressed before. At the same time, in such critical contexts, putting material, non-human, non-social components center stage seems almost beside the point: after all, films, just like art objects in a more general sense, are objects that gain meaning only from their embeddedness and circulation within the human, social world; they are produced for human consumption. Do you have similar experiences in the field of contemporary art? What happens when we lavish attention on non-human components to enrich existing concepts of representation? Do we act against our better knowledge, namely, that representation, in its very core, is of the human world? And do we give up the very subject at stake in the politics of representation, namely, addressing the inequality and injustice of how marginalized human agents are represented as non-human or less than human in dominant visual cultures – as, for instance, could be argued with Stuart Hall, Jack Halberstam or Judith Butler?

AS: Before I try to think about concrete examples in art I would like to address the issue you just raised, namely that you are sceptical of putting material subjects center stage, to treat them like human subjects. I think it is crucial to think about the differences between for example Butler's attack on binary formations and that of Karen Barad. Butler addresses the problem within the framework of post-structuralist thought and in the sphere of philosophy and language. Her approach allows for a multiplication of potential identity formations or subject potentials since it focuses on the performative dimension of these processes. Barad takes this approach and introduces it to the world of quantum physics, engaging with the sub-particle exchanges and flows that give rise to material phenomena. She proposes conceiving them as discursive formations – yet, importantly, not in the sense of language, but in

6)

See, for instance, Hofer, Kristina Pia (2014): *Vom Begehren nach Materialität: Sonischer Dreck, Exploitationkino, feministische Theorie*. In: *FKW Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und visuelle Kultur*. Issue 57, pp. 28-40.

the sense that boundary formations emerge from interactions, and in turn become the preconditions for new ones. This conception is radically context-dependent, and introduces an enormous level of situational complexity into the proceedings. Its radicality emerges precisely from the conceptual import of the deconstruction of binary formations on the order of language and culture, into the quantum order of physical materiality.

KPH: Let's take a step back from Barad and the framework of STS feminism, and return to my earlier question about object-centered thinking in contexts that are very much dominated by human agency, like the art world, or, more precisely, present-day art markets. It is interesting how matter-oriented frames other than new materialist feminisms, especially object-oriented ontology and speculative realism, are quite effectively incorporated in current market rhetorics. The Salon program that accompanied Art Basel Hong Kong 2016, for instance, hosted an evening of panel discussions on "New Materialities" and "The Post Human Condition," where artists, critics and curators debated the possible agentiality, vibrancy, liveliness of artworks – and this in the context of a huge trade fair, which is predominately about human agents moving artworks for large sums of money. In your opinion, what is the value, the function of such theories in such a setting?

AS: I think that you can take a very simple, slightly superficial approach to this, and just look at it as artists being allowed simply to produce singular objects again, which are much easier to trade in markets, a phenomenon that has been referred to as Zombie Formalism by critics such as Walter Robinson.⁷⁾ So from the perspective of somebody who works in so-called media art, this might even appear as a kind of backlash – a drive towards decomplexification and depoliticization. In any case, at present, traditional forms of art, such as sculpture and painting, have again become increasingly important in the global art market. During the phase of financial capitalism the speculation with art assets has continuously intensified. However, as I said, this is what appears on the surface and I think there are clearly additional reasons for the interest in new materialism displayed by the art world. From my personal practice as an artist in the 1990s, I remember the conception of a trend towards dematerialization, particularly in connection with digital technologies, that was detected and criticized during that time. Many of the theories of dematerialization or even "fractalization" by thinkers like Lyotard or Baudrillard reinforced the perceived separation between the material world

7)
Robinson, Walter (2014): Flipping
and the Rise of Zombie Formalism.
In: artspace magazine,
[http://www.artspace.com/magazine/
contributors/see_here/the_rise_
of_zombie_formalism-52184](http://www.artspace.com/magazine/contributors/see_here/the_rise_of_zombie_formalism-52184), last
accessed July 5, 2016.

and the world of signs. If you followed Baudrillard,⁸⁾ who was very important for some artists during this time, you were concerned with a kind of decoupling between material reality and the world of signs and models, or as Baudrillard called it, “hyperreality.” The important point was that they all pointed towards a kind of rupture, a movement from “real space” into cyberspace, and in this sense they kept hanging on to binary models of the separation between matter and spirit, now translated into matter and digital realm. There was a lot of talk about the vanishing of the body as an effect of digital technologies. Today I believe that this fear of losing the body in immaterial worlds is something we have moved through and done away with. And this might also have to do with slowly beginning to develop a different reading of the digital transformation, and how it affects our world. It hasn’t just sucked out the (material) world into an invisible realm of data. On the contrary, it has completely rearranged almost all of the relations between different entities and amalgamations of them. In this sense it has not removed anything, but enriched the relations between different actors and phenomena. This becomes very evident in the field of logistics, for example. There is a very real, physical reorganization of processes of transporting material things and commodities happening on the basis of these so-called immaterial technologies. And I think with realizations such as these emerges a renewed interest in the material basis of information technologies themselves. For example, the interest researchers like Jussi Parikka⁹⁾ have in the material, geological basis of communications technology. Of course, this interest opens up the economical and political dimensions of these technologies – from issues such as increased automatization, cheap labour in Chinese phone factories, the coltan wars in Central Africa, the immense amounts of power necessary for the upkeep of data centers and so on. In the art world, people like Hito Steyerl¹⁰⁾ address some of these issues by highlighting the material and political dimensions of contemporary communication technologies.



8)
Baudrillard, Jean (1994): *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

9)
Parikka, Jussi (2015): *A Geology of Media*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

10)
For example: Hito Steyerl, *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational. MOV File*, 2013; *Factory of the Sun*. Video installation, 2016.

// Figure 1
Axel Stockburger: *No Ghost Just a Shell* (After Pierre Huyghe) (2012). C-Print.

KPH: Actually, this could be one way to address the “politics” in the title of our workshop. This, then, is an “old” concept of politics. Because when we are asking where the coltan in our phones comes from, and where – and under which conditions – those phones are assembled, we are asking about the exploitation of workers and resources. At the same time, it connects to a post-colonial conception of politics, as it asks about how the Global North profits from the exploitation of workers and resources of the Global South. In a way, new materialist theorizing can be “retro” in its own right: it can be reminiscent of Marxist materialism in the sense that it can lead to questions about who owns the means of production, and who gets paid for what exactly.

AS: I think there are a lot of reasons to think about that and not to throw materialist approaches that appear to be “retro” out of the window completely.

KPH: Absolutely, but the way object-oriented thinking appears on art markets today does not necessarily address materiality in this sense. Let me return to an example from Art Basel Hong Kong 2016. In the panel discussion on “The Post Human Condition,” the central piece debated was an installation of Wang Yuyang’s, in which the artist manipulated books to make them appear as if they were breathing, their covers softly heaving up and down like a human (or animal) body inhaling and exhaling. Here, thinking materially did not entail questioning under which – possibly problematic, possibly unjust – conditions the material setup for the production and circulation of art in the specific context of a large international fair are assembled. Rather, objects were championed as living, breathing beings – imbued with life *akin* to those of humans. Wang posited that his piece was critical insofar as it wanted to raise the question if objects – as living things – had rights. I must admit I was a little disturbed by this. First, I did not quite see the “post human” quality of the installation, which after all animated objects by bestowing characteristics of organic life – breathing – upon them. Second, I feel that suggesting objects had “rights” is a way of further humanizing discourses on materiality – as I understand it, historically, the notion of rights is intimately tied to the notion of the sovereign subject. Does that mean that objects should obtain subject status in Wang’s art? If that’s the case, I don’t see how it calls into question the binaries we have discussed earlier today.

AS: When we talk about “rights,” one right that immediately comes to mind is the question of ownership and the set of rights regarding

property that guarantee it. Where does this idea to own a thing essentially originate? This is an issue we inherited from Roman law, and it is thus historically contingent. What is relevant in this context was the conception that the “dominium” (ownership, title, property) afforded absolute rights over particular material entities up to their consumption or destruction, to a specific kind of Roman citizen, the predominantly male “dominus,” the master of the house. Many previous arrangements regulated access to material objects or land based on a whole range of different rights of use, exercised by different subjects or communities. In this sense, throughout history there have existed many examples where the use of resources, things, objects is regulated outside of this particular idea of absolute ownership over substance and physical materiality. So for me this would be one way of reinterpreting or rethinking subject-object relationships, because it shows that what is crucial in this context is not to give up the subject, but to develop different forms of relations between subjects and objects. One novel approach to this question was addressed in the current resurgence of the conception of the commons.¹¹⁾ Here the issue is how to develop layered systems of engagement, participation and use of the material world. Such a layered approach also enables us to develop an ecologically adequate form of thinking about the rights of non-human actors, like natural resources, animals and so on, in balance with that of other agents forming part of a system.

KPH: I am just always uneasy about delving into speculations about how our understanding of concepts like rights – or in that case, agency – could be expanded to include inorganic components like paper, ink and cardboard, while the actual execution of rights in the traditional sense – in the sense that they govern societies – still have a hard time recognizing actual people and human populations as deserving subjects. I am thinking of how Europe de-humanizes refugees by calling their movements “waves” or “floods,” as if they were a destructive natural force beyond reason, set on hitting the Global North without motivation, and completely unjustified.

AS: You are right about this perception of strategic dehumanization undertaken by the political right and the media – turning people into natural phenomena. However, this is not a new phenomenon at all, and has to be addressed as such. And still, while this is happening, we are also witnessing a technological transformation that literally makes formerly inanimate things “speak.” With developments like the Internet of Things, there already exists a

11)

Ostrom, Elinor (1990): *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

logic that makes objects speak within the world of the economy of global logistics. RFID tags allow for continuous territorial calls, a bit like birds' songs, marking territories, space, location. When commodities and objects are interpellated to communicate with us, we have to ask which language they will use. Or, in other words, how can we escape a grammar that is entirely scripted by late capitalism, centered on property rights and closed algorithmic environments?

KPH: Of course, inquiring into the language of objects raises the question of ethics again. As I understand it, one of the big assets of semiotic and language-based discursive approaches to the politics of representation was actually to dislodge the meaning from the substrate of a thing – to demonstrate convincingly that artefacts (and 'natural' things, for that) are infused with meaning by their political environment, by the social contexts they circulate in. This is emancipatory because it allows sets of rhetorics to be dismantled – like in the audiovisual language of cinema, which in its mainstream incarnation essentializes and naturalizes difference. I am thinking of images we understand as sexist, racist and so on. Taking this into consideration, do new materialist approaches run the risk of undermining the emancipatory politics of language-based projects? How can the idea that a thing, or its material substrate, can actually transport meaning in its own right integrate with these more traditional emancipatory politics? I guess this is where entanglement becomes important again – to highlight how meaning forms from and within the interconnection and exchange between human and non-human dimensions, instead of: meaning being produced by either the human or the thing, in isolation, and by themselves alone.

AS: I think it should not be a question of a simple swapping of positions, by instilling a "classic" notion of subjectivity in things, which might lead to an echo of magical worldviews, where everything is enchanted or can be possessed by spirits or demons. In other words, if this approach leads to an anthropomorphization of everything, I believe we will not be able to integrate it with traditional emancipatory politics, because the problem started precisely with a stance of human ignorance in relation to the world.

— We are already confronted with contingent dynamic formations that involve matter in all its forms – human, animal, inorganic, machinic – "assemblages" if you want to use Deleuze and Guattari's term. A first step is to accept these entangled forms and to try to understand their configurations. I guess the crucial question is

to ask which desires, protocols or ideological formations give rise to these configurations, and then to focus on the relations between those elements. When you address the issue of the production of meaning, one could also ask how complex systems produce “meanings,” which become input for automated, scripted reactions acted upon by other machinic assemblages. The phenomenon of high frequency trading in finance is such an example: a certain kind of meaning is produced, which is acted upon by automated systems according to rules produced by human agents, but on a timescale that is not directly accessible to human actors anymore, with effects on all kinds of possible entities, and most importantly with a high degree of contingency. I am convinced that this is also an important field for artists to intervene in – to establish meaningful encounters between subjective intentionality and contingency.

KPH: Let’s stay with contingency for a bit, as it brings us back to questions of historicity, and of working with dated formats. When preparing this workshop, we spent considerable time trying to untangle the different temporalities at work when artists employ dated technologies in their present-day practice. Dated technologies are technologies that are not state-of-the-art today, but certainly were at another time – like certain analog video formats, for instance. Artistic practices actively seek out engagement with such technologies for many different reasons, ranging from being motivated by nostalgia, to simply grabbing the first, cheapest piece of gear that might be available or accessible. As a video artist, can you share some thoughts about the generational dynamics of video, and how these dynamics impinge on your practice?

AS: Well, I have been working with video for almost 20 years, and have witnessed a number of technological transformations. I have used different devices and formats, from analog U-matic, S-Video and VHS formats to digital formats, from SD over HD to 4K video. The storage devices became smaller and smaller, while the image resolution increased and literally changed its nature with the transition from analog towards digital forms of registration, storage and dissemination. As an artist, you are confronted with the problem of choosing a format or device that you can work with for as long as possible, due to economical factors as well as the learning curve for new technologies. Furthermore, the issue of formats is also a social issue to a certain extent, since you are always dealing with others, whether during the production or the reception of your work. For example, I remember working with a particular camera set up for a period of time at the end of the 1990s that

I was quite happy with and I was sad when new formats took over. A lot of the discussion with colleagues is dedicated to identifying devices and practices that will be “future-proof” to a certain extent – that you can work with for a relatively long period. I think this is an important issue because a lot of these devices have their own program, not only because many are made for consumer markets, but simply because every format has its own specific affordances which are pre-coded in the hardware and software. I think with Vilém Flusser¹²⁾ that to be an artist also means to investigate this coding, and to attempt to work against the program of the device.

KPH: I think it is a fascinating idea, to be looking for a format which is future-proof. Maybe this desire, in a nutshell, explains the appeal of working with dated formats. In present-day popular music production, for instance, and especially in the independent sector, a large number of artists seem to just love working with old gear, analog gear, vintage gear. Is this because those apparatuses appear future-proof in a way? With such formats, you know what to expect, you know what the limits are, they won't change that much anymore because they're off the market in a way. On the other hand, some of those formats also seem future-proof in a negative sense: there literally seems to be no future for them, as they no longer evolve or adapt according to present practices of consumption. Vinyl record pressing plants are a good example. They are future-proof in the sense that some of them have survived the transition to digital storage formats, and they continue to provide artists and collectors with a format of a certain longevity, that, over the past decades, has seen very few changes in the way it works, technically speaking. Future-proof here means that the format will probably last. At the same time, however, pressing plants are future-proof because they are relics. Only a handful of operating plants are left in Europe, and they are aging rapidly. Since they are leftovers from a different era of music production, the technology they depend on is no longer produced, and if components break, they might be hard to replace – you might have to find a “vintage” component, if you will. Also, the people who know how to maintain the machinery are literally passing on, too. If market demands change, this aging, out-dated infrastructure is unable to adapt. See the current debate on the growing market for vinyl records, and the massive backlog at the few remaining pressing plants many artists feel this development has caused. So, there is an interesting tension to being future-proof. What is attractive about it for you?

12)

Flusser, Vilém (2000): *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. London: Reaktion Books.

AS: I think it is essentially an economic question. How often can you afford to buy a new device and how long will you then be able to work with it? And the same question emerges in the case of outmoded formats, since in many cases the outdated media will be much more expensive, since there is no mass market for it anymore. A telling example was the return of Polaroid that many photographers were interested in. The films became quite expensive in comparison to their heyday in the past. If you want to engage in this practice now, you have to pay to become part of the select group of connoisseurs in this format or medium.

KPH: Speaking about formats being resuscitated: in *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*,¹³⁾ Rosalind Krauss suggests that outmoded media formats harbor a certain utopian potential; a potential that is arguably released when artists integrate such dated formats in contemporary practice. In Krauss's account, such utopian potential crucially hinges on a format's true obsolescence: it has to be off the market for good, and devoid of its value as a commodity. When thinking of examples like vinyl records or Polaroid film: are these formats at all obsolete, in Krauss's sense? After all, both records and Polaroid technology have successfully re-entered niche markets, with "original" gear and releases often selling for twenty times their former retail price. Instead of seeing the release of a utopian potential, we are looking at the same old cycle of commodities being exchanged for money.

AS: I absolutely agree with you. It is indeed interesting that outmoded or outdated media technologies have such a strong foothold in the field of art. And I think one of the reasons for this might be that the devices themselves take on an aesthetic dimension once they have become obsolete for a mass market. I teach at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, and a lot of our video students are very interested in the classic video cubes, like the Hantarex. I think this has to do with the fact that they formally represent "classic" video art for them. When I asked them about it, many answered that this was the case, but others added that they were interested in the "sculptural dimension" too. Certain contemporary artists have also decided to focus on the sculptural and aesthetic dimension of present day LCD monitors, such as for example Simon Denny, who uses Samsung devices. There are, however, others who treat these devices as "neutral" – for them, the image reproduction device does not matter as such. Personally, I am more interested in allowing a video to flow through all kinds of

13)

Krauss, Rosalind (2000): *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*. London: Thames & Hudson.

different forms of “re-performances”, if you want to call it that. For me this is actually a specific strength of digital technologies – that they break medium specificity in this sense, and open up towards a huge range of potential devices and contexts of reception.

KPH: What do you mean by “re-performance”?

AS: Imagine this: You have a digital piece of art and if you allow it to enter the Internet you lose any control over which device it will be displayed on. In this sense the piece will be re-performed each time from a digital code according to the display device, which affects its materialization: you might watch it on your laptop or a small mobile device,

or somebody might project it with a video projector. Another thing that comes to mind in this context is the relationship between original and copy. A few years ago Byung-Chul Han published a book about Shanzhai¹⁴⁾ – where he contrasts Eastern ways of thinking about the original and the authentic with the contemporary Western logic of material identity. Just to give you a little example: currently, we have this idea of archeology where a site becomes authentic because the same stones have been in place for hundreds and thousands of years. In contrast to that, Japanese temples are rebuilt continuously, following a program, yet they are precisely not regarded as inauthentic.

— This understanding of authenticity was also dominant in the West until modern conceptions of originality, creation and history emerged in the seventeenth century, introducing a different perspective. Considering this change might help us understand the extent to which identity and authenticity have become entangled with the dimension of physical materiality in the Western tradition. This conception of identity appears to be highly artificial when you confront it with organic principles of reproduction, such as for example the growth of plants.

KPH: Notions of authenticity are, of course, strongly charged with emotion. In general, there has been a huge body of critical work, but also art works, that deals with both historicity and materiality

14)

Han, Byung-Chul (2011): *Shanzhai: Dekonstruktion auf Chinesisch*. Berlin: Merve.



// Figure 2

Axel Stockburger: *No Ghost Just a Shell* (After Pierre Huyghe) (2012). C-Print.

in terms of desire. Nostalgia as a key term comes to mind, as does, for the context of popular culture, “retromania.”¹⁵⁾ What’s up with that charge? How do you experience it in your work? How do you experience it teaching your students? You already mentioned the video cubes. Is there desire at work as well? It can’t just be all about convention ... but maybe I’m wrong?

AS: Yes, of course there is desire at work. The question is how this desire comes about. I believe that desire is an effect of distance. And what is the distance at stake in this context? Some of the obsolete technologies we spoke about are distanced in time. Some of these devices and objects almost become fetishes of sorts. And if you take this thought further, the kind of distance that is produced qua fetish could potentially allow the reintroduction of critique, albeit in the classic sense; critique that is possible because an object of critique is generated via the introduction of distance. So where did the concept of the fetish originate? It initially appeared in a post-colonial setting, where Western observers described the specific relationships between certain objects and the special powers that were ascribed to them in various animistic traditions as fetishistic. Western observers, rooted in their version of the scientific, regarded these world-views as primitive and naive. But clearly they overlap strongly with the way artists perceive and live their relationships with things and objects – where they talk to them as if they were alive and so on. Another route into the question of the fetish in art leads through the market and the idea of scarcity. Art in its commodity form is a luxury good, something that needs to be scarce. Obsolete technologies turn into antiques or scarce goods over time. In this sense I believe many artists, whether consciously or subconsciously, employ these outmoded, now relatively scarce objects in order to heighten the uniqueness and perceived singularity of their works.

— This represents a return to the classic logic of art production, where the most direct way to commodify a work of art is through material scarcity and the material uniqueness of the work of art. At the same time, many of the artist brands that currently dominate the global market for contemporary art preside over large studios with many employees and depend on industrial production logistics. I am convinced that a simplified reading of the theoretical approaches grouped under “new materialism” in the context of artistic production has led to a renewal of fetishistic fascination with the materials used in art, while the critical potential of these theories is often overlooked or even dismissed.

15)

Reynolds, Simon (2011): *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*. New York: Faber & Faber.

For example, one of the most resistant constructions in the field of art, namely that of authorship, could possibly be approached differently if one were to take the “agentiality” of non-human entities into account. After all, new materialism seems to offer a way to re-evaluate the complex relationships between all those different entities. In this sense, it could be useful for the project of re-thinking the dominant systems that structure the field of contemporary art, which are still to a large degree characterized by the myth of the independent and autonomous male genius of creation. In this sense, new forms of collaborative authorship, which highlight the value of all the entities contributing to the emergence of works of art, would be an interesting outcome of a deeper engagement with new materialism. If we take this thought further we have to ask if the notion of authorship should be widened in order to include non-human actors.

KPH: But how will those actors get paid? (Audience laughs)

AS: How will we get beyond pay? Will we ever get beyond the dominance of the economic? I don't know, but just like the numerous externalities of capitalist economic operations that have to be addressed, this amounts to an issue of respect for all the agents, human and non-human, that are involved in making art.

// Image Credits

Fig.1-2: Axel Stockburger: No Ghost Just a Shell (After Pierre Huyghe) (2012). C-Print. Photograph by the artist.

This text was copy edited by Daniel Hendrickson.

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