

Introduction : Dated formats now: Material practices in audiovisual art

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INTRODUCTION //

DATED FORMATS NOW: MATERIAL PRACTICES IN AUDIOVISUAL ART

Two old tube television sets are playing low quality video images with substantial amounts of lines and dropout, which give them the appearance of authentic historical footage from the '90s.¹⁾ The two different sequences, each playing on its own screen, put the year 1992 on display in gritty home-video aesthetics in Henrike Naumann's installation *Triangular Stories* (2012). Screen one offers glimpses of a young woman partying with a group of friends on a holiday, taking ecstasy and dancing. Screen two shows Nazi paraphernalia and a gang of violent youths including the same young woman, hanging out and making trouble in rural east Germany [fig. 1]. Both videos are reenactments: the latter

of actual events, namely, of Beate Zschäpe's radicalization as a teenager in the ultra right-wing German terror cell NSU (National Socialist Underground), which was responsible for a series of assassinations of Turkish-Germans and other hate crimes in the 2000s, the other of the legendary dance parties in Ibiza's Amnesia club, here focalized through a young tourist who shares Zschäpe's age, gender, and East German background. Obviously, the installation complicates the historical quality of the stories

told in terms of its narrative content. We are left to wonder what connects the two videos and their protagonists. Is the Ibiza video meant to pitch hedonist club culture against fascist socialization, almost as if suggesting an alternative direction that Zschäpe's life could have taken? But there is more: *Triangular Stories* also challenges the histories it traces by its choice of recording medium. Naumann, who describes VHS as "the Super-8 of her generation,"²⁾ deliberately deploys the outmoded recording technology and its characteristic textures dotted with the artefacts and seams of tape



1)
See Henrike Naumann's Website. <http://www.henrikenaumann.com/triangularstories.html>, last accessed December 22, 2016, and her catalogue "The Effects Can Last Forever" (2014). Naumann is also contributing this FKW's artists' edition, which is discussed in Kathrin Köppert's review.

2)
Unpublished interview with Henrike Naumann by Marietta Kesting, 2016

// Figure 1
Henrike Naumann: *Triangular Stories* (2012). VHS, 2 channels, color, sound.

demagnetization to invoke (or, more drastically speaking, to fake) the particular historicity her installation is supposed to transport.

— The insistent presence of dated formats in contemporary artworks like Naumann's that emphasize the material dimension of the medium, is an apt site to explore a central argument of the not so recent "material turn"³⁾: that non-human components in the world are able to produce and communicate meaning on their very own terms. Understanding matter as vibrant and actively contributing to world-making in performative processes, new materialist feminist and queer scholarship conceptualizes relations between objects and observers, between human agents and non-human components in processes of meaning-making as "intra-active" – a neologism introduced by the physicist and queer philosopher Karen Barad (2003, 2007, 2012a, b). Intra-action challenges the assumption that material objects are contained, static, and stable formations whose fixed inner logic or inherent 'truth' causes determinable effects. According to Barad, who uses the perspective of quantum physics, neither objects nor subjects have boundaries before they come in contact with each other: rather, it is in their exchange in which they come to exist in the first place. Consequently, for Barad, agency is no property or intrinsic quality residing within either the material object or the human subject, but a distributed "enactment," unfolding in processes of engagement (2003: 826f).

— More than a decade into the material turn, this issue of FKW re-assesses the critical potential of material agentiality for audiovisual art in temporal terms. Though by no means a new field of inquiry, explorations of materiality, its ability to act, perform, and communicate, and its implicit politics, have been increasingly in demand in recent artistic and academic practices, as the large number of publications, conferences, and exhibitions on the subject demonstrates⁴⁾. Dated formats meet this demand particularly well, since they allow for an experience of the material aspects of audiovisual art in a very direct way: they are able to guide a viewer's (and listener's, as Andy Birtwistle would insist) attention away from the content and to the carrier; highlighting the medium, the technology, and the particular surfaces and textures these material components afford (Marks 2002, Birtwistle 2011, Bruno 2014).

WHAT ARE THE "POLITICS" OF MATERIAL AGENTIALITY? —

Queer feminist scholars arguing for a material turn have often

3)

Of course, not all ideas from the new materialistic theorists are really new. It seems especially tempting to historicize new materialism in its connection to earlier Marxist concepts of materialism, for instance, Walter Benjamin's writing on media and artifacts, particularly in his unfinished *Arcades Project* (1982, Engl. translation 1999), which suggests the artefacts of the nineteenth century as antecedents of contemporary society. Another earlier concept that comes to mind is Heidegger's object – das "Ding," cf. Heidegger 2000 [1950], pp. 165-188. One feminist thinker most influential to Barad's work is of course Donna Haraway, whose groundbreaking, Marxist-informed feminist science studies have highlighted non-human agentiality from the 1980s onwards, cf. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s" (1987); "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspectives" (1988); *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. Female-Man@Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* (1997); *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (2003); and, most recently, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016). Karen Barad herself addresses her indebtedness to Donna Haraway in Barad 2012a, p. 12.

4)

See, for instance, Barrett and Bolt 2013; Stakemeier and Witzgall 2014; Joselit, Lambert-Beatty and Foster 2016; Cox, Jaskey and Malik 2015; *Die Sprache der Dinge. Materialgeschichte aus der Sammlung*, (exhibition at 21er Haus Vienna, 10 June 2016 – 22 January 2017); *Poetiken des Materials* (exhibition at Leopold Museum Vienna, 21. October 2016 – 26. February 2017); *Object Lesson Nr 9. Material and Knowledge* (symposium at Museum der Dinge, Berlin, 13. January 2017). Many international artists, among them Janine Antoni, Helen Chadwick, Mel Chin, Mark Dion, Jimmie Durham, Chohreh Feyzdjou, Romuald Hazoumè, Pierre Huyghe, Ilya Kabakov, Teresa Margolles, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Shozo Shimamoto, Santiago Sierra, Robert Smithson, Simon Starling, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Kara Walker, have explored materialities in recent works.

claimed the concept of agency to also include objects, things, animal and plant life, especially when breaking them down to their molecular, atomic, subatomic level: to waves, electrons, quarks, and so on.⁵⁾ Such a reconsideration obviously also affects – and possibly changes – concepts of the “political.” After all, in modern Western political, philosophical, and sociological discourses, agency is strongly connected to (if not dependent on) the notion of the sovereign, human subject, or even the sovereign, human citizen (Meißner 2013). Perhaps this is part of the reason why Barad herself has never spoken of the “politics” of material agency, but instead of “ethics” of mattering, and why she keeps addressing questions of power as an “ethico-onto-epistemological issue,” instead of a political one (2007, 2012a). We are aware that by insisting on “the political” as a term of central interest in our exploration of material agentiality, we may maneuver ourselves into a cul-de-sac with incompatible terminologies. However, we are willing to take this risk, since we are also still committed to the “old,” human-centered political aims and investments of gender and cultural studies. We share the concerns of thinkers like David Joselit, Carrie Lambert-Beatty, and Hal Foster, who have already mapped out some of the pitfalls in this discussion in the Winter 2016 issue of *October*: “Is it possible, or desirable, to decenter the human in discourse on art in particular? What is gained in the attempt and what – or who – disappears from view? Is human difference – gender, race, power of all kinds – elided? What are the risks in assigning agency to objects; does it absolve us of responsibility, or offer a new platform for politics?” (3). Similarly, the challenge in this volume was to come up with a concept of “the political” that would include the possible agentiality of non-human objects and matter, but also remain aware of the power relations that form, govern, and posit human subjectivities toward each other.

—— Polemically, one could state that there are simply no politics of material agentiality, since there is no “parliament of things” – at least not in the same way as there are parliaments of humans. However, one possible approach lies in following philosopher Jacques Rancière (2004), who defined the political as the viable sites where various orderings and social relations become “sensible,” that is, perceptible via the (bodily) senses. These public realms are structured by materiality and affects, which are experienced and perceived, as well as performed, by humans. The political can thus be understood as a matter of intra-action: the (social, political) impact of an artwork is mediated through its material

5)

See Barad 2003, 2007, 2012;
Parisi 2004; Coole and Frost 2010;
Hekman 2010; Braidotti 2013.

dimensions, *while* perceived by human subjects. Meaning – as a site that affects power relations among humans – does not get inscribed into the artwork from outside, but constitutes itself while interacting with the work, and with the processes that make the work visible, audible, and tangible. Such understanding puts the focus of analysis on how the work’s materiality distributes what is sensible for human viewers. As visual and environmental studies theorist Giuliana Bruno contends, this perception of materiality emphasizes the relationality of materials, how they connect to and interact with another, and with the realm of meaning and ideas.⁶⁾ Similarly, Bruno Latour defines the political in terms of our connections with and attachment to things that become public *matters*: “It’s clear that each object – each issue – generates a different pattern of emotions and disruptions, of disagreements and agreements. [...] Each object gathers around itself a different assembly of relevant parties. [...] In other words, objects – taken as so many issues – bind all of us in ways that map out a public space profoundly different from what is usually recognized under the label of ‘the political’” (2005: 5).

—— The question of the political might thus need to be re-stated as: do politics of material agents exist, and what are, in the broadest sense, public matters and issues? What objects and materials do they entail, how can we recognize them and discuss them? Obviously, material objects do not cast a vote, they don’t have representatives, even though some artists have recently challenged this idea (as for example Wang Yuyang who states that objects have rights too, and wants them to express themselves and be part of a ‘democracy’).⁷⁾ How can we as theorists, practitioners, and artists take this claim seriously, without resorting to an anthropocentric comparison, “humanizing” or cutifying objects, which at least to us seems like the opposite of what theories of new materialisms aim for?

TIME, MATERIALITY, HISTORICITY —— Obviously, an agential conceptualization of materiality raises relevant questions about the dated textures and technologies in works such as Naumann’s *Triangular Stories*: what exactly can an artwork’s material dimensions do, which dynamics can they set off, and what perceptive and affective structures and realms of the sensible can they mobilize in an encounter with a human viewer and listener? When dated formats are summoned to tell historical stories – be they personal, national, or those concerning the medium itself – such redirection of attention also necessitates re-thinking theories of representation

6)
“...materiality is not a question of materials themselves or a matter of ‘thingness’ per se but rather concerns the substance of material relations” (Bruno 2016: 15).

7)
Wang Yuyang at the Art Basel Hongkong 2016 Platform Talk with David Joselit, also see the artist’s website: <http://www.wangyuyang.net/>

by and through materiality. History is often thought of as acting *upon* matter, as inscribing itself in objects and technologies. Time, the dynamic force, altering matter, the inert being: we encounter such an understanding in the index, the faithful trace, the authentic documentary source, and other concepts describing (or rather: limiting) the ways material things are allowed to represent and signify in semiotic frameworks. In contrast, thinking matter as agential and able to engage with time and storytelling in an intra-active fashion allows us to grasp the multiplicity and diversity of relationships materializing in contemporary artistic practices today, which often strongly depend on non-linear, non-teleologic conceptions of time and history (cf. Kernbauer 2014). Barad highlights that new materialist approaches should pay careful attention to the performative qualities of temporality itself. In an intra-active understanding, time does not just pass, and history does not just amass behind the now. Instead, “time itself is constituted through the dynamics of intra-activity and the past remains open to material reconfigurings” (Barad 2007: 383). She stresses that if we understand “*matter ... [as] a doing, a congealing of agency*” (2003: 822, italics in original), material configurations are maximally contingent, and carry in them a call to consider all the different possibilities to enact and perform otherwise in the future.

— The contributions to this volume employ a similar understanding of historicity as materially entangled, when they show that untimely, outdated materialities warrant as much engagement with present and future states as they do with those of the past (Laura Marks), when they address how imagined, fantastic, fabricated histories too may materialize as tangible and physical (Henrike Naumann), when they unpack the complicated temporalities (and untimely utopian promises) at work within nostalgic ‘retro’ sensibilities (Gabriele Jutz), when they question the supposed immediate historical-representative properties of the sound of outdated technologies (Andy Birtwistle), or when they discuss the very weight of objects as subject to changes by way of discursive shifts (Axel Stockburger & Kristina Pia Hofer). All contributions share an interest in tracing the *trajectories* of sounds and images in their materiality; their movement(s), and physical *and* political re-configurations, through space and time. All authors are invested in showing how aesthetics in their material manifestations – glitch, wear, artefacts, lossy compression, format incompatibilities, and format expansions – can communicate the historical and political circumstances in which sounds and images can travel, or be kept from moving.

— Importantly, historicity – in this volume – also means putting ‘new materialism’ in a historical context instead of celebrating it as a completely new perspective. We share Jordana Rosenberg’s concerns when she provocatively argues that “the urge towards objects comports itself in a very particular fashion, one that will be familiar to scholars of colonialism and settler-colonialism, and that calls to mind any number of New-World-style fantasies about locations unmediated by social order. The ontological turn [...] reshapes an old paradigm, a primitivist fantasy that hinges on the violent erasure of the social: the conjuring of a realm – an ‘ancestral realm’ – that exists in the present, but in parallax to historical time. *A terra nullius* of the theoretical landscape” (Rosenberg 2014: 16). We thus pursue our interest in material entanglements in dated sound and video formats not to propagate a “turn,” but much rather to trace how earlier understandings of the politics of sounds and images can, even must, continue anew, and be reconfigured, in recent materialist theoretical frames. We are interested in tracing how in the history of visual and sonic critique the endeavour of thinking intra-action by no means stands isolated and alone, but connects to the political issues that have driven feminist engagements with sound and video art for decades.

— This volume substantially draws from discussions that took place in the framework of the workshop “What are the politics of material agentiality?” on April 22 and 23, 2016 at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, which was organized by Kristina Pia Hofer, Eva Kernbauer, and Marietta Kesting as part of the FWF project *A Matter of Historicity – Material Practices in Audiovisual Art*.⁸⁾ Looking at a range of artistic practices, from archival salvaging of precarious film and video material (Laura Marks) to appropriative re-workings of modernist sound art (Andy Birtwistle); from probing modernist concepts of medium specificity by deploying obsolete formats (Axel Stockburger in dialogue with Kristina Pia Hofer, Gabriele Jutz as respondent to Andy Birtwistle) to re-thinking the museum and negotiating memory by restaging historically specific styles, fashion, and music cultures (Henrike Naumann), the contributors tried to trace the emancipatory, transgressive, utopian, finally political potential that they located in the use of dated formats. Most remarkably, the contributions to the workshop, and this volume, do not often explicitly address gender politics in their ‘traditional’ sense, which would strongly bind them to the categories of difference deployed in the formation of human subjectivities. Is this because gender, as a category, becomes less

8)

For more information on the project, see
<http://www.amatterofhistoricity.net/>

meaningful when working with the materialities analyzed here? Or does moving the inquiry to the materiality of media and art works also mean moving beyond (human) genders? If so, there are still open questions about the intimate connection to the viewer's and listener's body and embodied responses suggested by many authors of new materialism, and also by the authors of this volume, especially Gabriele Jutz and Laura Marks.

“SUBJECTLESS” CRITIQUE? — The obvious trouble with integrating political categories in materialist inquiry mirrors the shift away from the subject to object ontologies and technologies that José Esteban Muñoz, Jack J. Halberstamm, and David Eng already proposed in 2005: “What might be called the ‘subjectless’ critique of queer studies disallows any positing of a proper subject *of* or object *for* the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent” (3). Gabriele Dietze, Beatrice Michaelis and Elahe Haschemi Yekanki, who rekindled the debate in Germany in 2012, explain this development as an attempt to re-think critical automatisms that assume – and deploy – categories of difference as relatively rigid, unchanging binaries (Dietze, Haschemi Yekani, and Michaelis 2012). Turning attention to relations between non-human materialities and human agents, they argue, could once again raise an awareness that human bodies and subjectivities, however and of course always gendered and racialized, are anything but fixed entities, but themselves unstable and shifting networks and aggregate states. In this way, feminist new materialism may have been a necessary new approach out of the stalemate of identity-based politics.

— However, subjects and subjectivities have not become completely meaningless. Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky (2016) cautioned recently that the widening of queer studies' scope and the assumption that nature itself is inherently queer⁹⁾ may lead to ontologizing queerness itself, and relegates it to an ordinary, pre-human sphere outside of power structures and social relations. Similarly, Jordana Rosenberg has argued that object-ontologies and materialities run the risk of turning into myths of origins and primordial, ‘pure’ relations that are untainted by humans – which, paradoxically, constitutes a perspective that gender and queer studies have always worked so hard to deconstruct. We therefore agree with Giuliana Bruno, who asserts that “a turn toward the material in the study of visual space enhances

9)
Karen Barad, for example,
addresses atoms as
“ultraqueer critters” (2012b, 29).

the exploration of the phenomenal and the sensible worlds, [...] which configure the art object and mold its life in historicity. Such a way of approaching material practice does not exclude subjects and subjectivities but rather engages them” (2016: 14f). Thereby one can think of materiality as an active zone of encounter and admixture, a site of mediation and projection, memory and transformation (ibid.). So even if some of our contributors do not go into a detailed analysis of the subjectivities of producers and audiences, they are aware of their existence, while strategically foregrounding the material perspectives.

— Implicitly, the contributions to this volume follow up on a question central to many of the much-discussed publications of new (feminist) materialism:¹⁰⁾ Is there a different kind of (feminist) politics at work when approaching materiality? And what kind of different politics could this be? The contributions offer different trajectories and attempts to answer this question, from the modest claim of Birtwistle’s argument in sound art’s relation to material politics as listening to material noise, to Marks’s attention to precarious audio-visual archives; from Jutz’s engagement with the haptics of pixel visions’s toy cameras, to Henrike Naumann’s current work with interior design in Eastern Germany. Importantly, these positions share a concept of politics whose central point lies in *relinquishing power* – over material, over the meaning of an artwork, over the different ways into the historical stories an artwork may open up for different viewers and listeners. The contributions operationalize this question again and again as a question of agency, more precisely, in the question of what non-human agency – an agency of the material components of the sound and video pieces discussed, an agency not associated with the modern concept of the sovereign subject – could look, feel, sound like. The power Birtwistle, Jutz, Marks, and Stockburger see relinquished in the artworks they discuss essentially seems to be *authorial* power, the power to steer meaning by the human creator’s intention. Of course, such an assumption is always tied up with the gendered dynamics that authorship – and especially artistic authorship – has been caught up in modernity and afterward; they still are today, even though this is no longer on the forefront of discussions in 2017. Almost as if looking for a contrast foil to such strong concepts of (artistic, authorial, finally male) agency, Birtwistle, Marks, and Jutz all suggest a weaker concept of politics: the gesture of surrender, sharing, and giving over, and, in Jutz’s

10)

For instance, Coole and Frost 2010; Hekman 2010; Barrett and Bolt 2013; Braidotti 2013; Stakemeier and Witzgall 2014.

article, the gesture of surrender to a *minor* aesthetics in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari (1986).

— Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the minor seems an appropriate point of reference for a project that seeks to explore how artworks 'tell' historical stories intra-actively, that is, in processes where human and non-human meaning-making constitute each other. Though a concept seemingly preoccupied with the realm of words (a realm that Barad famously wants to decentralize),¹¹⁾ the "minor literatures" Deleuze and Guattari draw from also question the authorial subject as a sovereign subject. In some aspects, their formulations appear similar to Barad's new-materialist notion of intra-active world-making: "In 'The Investigations of a Dog' the expressions of the solitary researcher tend toward the assemblage (*agencement*) of a collective enunciation of the canine species even if this collectivity is no longer or not yet given. There isn't a subject; *there are only collective assemblages of enunciation*" (1986: 18, emphasis in original). Deleuze and Guattari's investment in such a "collective assemblage of enunciations," and especially the interest in how aesthetics (and grammars) connect to politics in such assemblages, also resonates with a question raised by Axel Stockburger in this volume: "When commodities and objects are interpellated to communicate with us, we have to ask *which language* they will use (23)."¹²⁾ Asking for the multiple languages of objects and their material dimensions, instead of excluding language as a seemingly privileged site of inquiry, could also mark a case in point for thinking together representation and new materialist approaches for making sense of dated formats in contemporary artworks. It highlights one more time that what is at stake is not shifting importance from one dimension to the other, or excluding one dimension for the privilege of the other, but really to take seriously their related-ness, their entanglement, and the claim that the subjectivities and the things intra-acting constitute each other in processes of exchange.

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// Image Credits

Fig.1: Henrike Naumann: *Triangular Stories* (2012). VHS, 2 channels, color, sound.
Actors: Maximilian Kias, Janina Stopper, Michel Diercks (f.l.t.r.) Video still courtesy of the artist.

11)

As exemplified by the much-quoted opening statement for her 2003 article in *Signs* – "Language has been granted too much power" (801).

12)

Of course, the question remains how exactly "language" is to be conceptualized in such a shared and intra-active framework, and there will be more than one answer depending on the objects in question. The Frankfurt School (Adorno 1975), for instance, cautioned that commodity objects always already talked 'too much,' and framed object language as a bearer of capitalist ideology in their critical theory. On the other hand, post-structuralism and particularly Jacques Derrida (1976) emphasized that languages, too, are never transparent, and do not necessarily lead to understanding or fulfilling ideological goals. Moreover, critics from the field of cultural studies and visual culture have often reminded us that language, and in particular text, is a concept that is very open to include performative and material aspects of objects, sounds, and images (for instance, Barthes 1977; Hall 1997; Serres 2007; Sedgwick 2003). Laura Marks has addressed the question of "translation" of the multisensory experiences afforded by art to the practices of academic writing at length in her introduction to *Touch* (2002). For FKW, Sigrid Adorf and Maike Christadler have sketched out a number of approaches to sounding out possible interactions between language, affect, and materiality in the context of the linguistic and affective turns in issue 55 (2014).

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