

# TRANSVERSAL PRACTICES

## Studies in Material Thinking

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EUROPEAN COOPERATION  
IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

VOLUME 16

*Transversal Practices: Matter,  
Ecology and Relationality*

PAPER 00

*Editorial*

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This special volume of *Studies in Material Thinking*, 'Transversal Practices: Matter, Ecology and Relationality' focuses on how intensities of movements, organic and inorganic, perceptible and imperceptible, are aligned with the hands-on attitude of artistic, scientific, therapeutic, ethnographical, and philosophical praxis. We examine how subjects, collectives, politics and thinking take form and transform in relation to other elements, human and non-human, through art-making; and further how intensities of movement through transversal practices refuse notions of binary, boundary or closure. In this volume we ask how transversal practices work, how we can account for or conceptualise them and what kinds of methodologies are called for in practices that involve what Iris van der Tuin describes as: 'taking a plunge into thinking in movement' (van der Tuin, 2014, p. 238).

The rubric of our call for papers for the Sixth Conference on New Materialisms (*Transversal Practices: Matter, Ecology and Relationality*) held at The Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne in 2015, and from which the papers in this volume have emerged, offered three keywords to inspire thinking about how aesthetic practices address these issues within a New Materialist perspective. The first was 'matter'—referring to ubiquitous, vibrant and continuous becoming that encompasses humans and non-humans, organic and non-organic entities implicated in practices that are always material, and often surprising in nature; the second was 'ecology'—indicating an open and continuously transforming system, that depends upon how its components and elements take form, transform or relate to each other; the third was 'relationality'—underpinned by the principle of being in the world, or moving with the

world as do artworks, ideas and collectives through processes of co-emergence.

The conundrum that both worries and inspires much of the discourse around New Materialisms relates to how we account for thinking subjects and practices of meaning-making within the context of post-humanist notions of the continuous and entangled nature of all matter of which humans comprise only a partial component. The challenge for practice within this context is related to tensions that arise between enactment and representation. As illuminated by Maaïke Bleeker in her essay in this volume, these tensions arise from the double articulation of the body as sensation and the body as 'a system of perceptions attitudes and beliefs'. The challenge of this-thinking-in-movement is how to enact and transmit the nuanced experiencing of this double articulation, or of what Erin Manning's essay elaborates here as a quality of 'the between, an interval that cannot quite be articulated' that practice instantiates as a movement between the perceptible and the (almost) imperceptible. These tensions are related to the positioning of the subject in practice as variously evidenced in all of the essays presented here.

Within this context, we suggest that New Materialism can be understood as a de-centring of the subject, one that is perhaps more radical than the de-centrings outlined in Stuart Hall's account of what he describes as late-modernity's five great de-centrings of the Cartesian subject (Hall, 1995, pp. 285-290). This essay is worth revisiting as a way of mapping theoretical shifts that have led up to New Materialist perspectives and in particular the notion of 'the posthuman'.

Hall's essay attributes the first of the de-centrings of the subject to Marxist thinking and the contention that, whilst humans make history, it is only on the basis of conditions which are not of their own making: modes of production, exploitation of labour power and circuits of capital (Hall, 1995, p. 286). Louis Althusser claims that Marxist theory displaced two fundamental propositions of modern Western philosophy: '(1) That there is a universal essence of man; (2) that this essence is the attribute of each "single individual" who is its real subject...'. (Althusser, 1966, cited in Hall, 1995, p. 286.) In Marxist thought the subject is posited as being limited to a multiplicity of external economic and social conditions. However, at the centre of this thinking there still remains the subject (albeit a collective or socially constituted subject) of interpellation; human agency retains a central position in the unfolding of history.

### *...the subject is no longer viewed as a unified subject of rational thought...*

Hall points to Freud's account of the unconscious as the second great de-centring of the subject. In this thinking the subject is no longer viewed as a unified subject of rational thought, but rather, is a split subject of the symbolic and also of the logic of the unconscious processes. Hence the subject arises 'not so much from the fullness of identity, which is already inside us as individuals, but from a *lack* of wholeness which is filled

from outside us, by the ways we imagine ourselves to be seen by [human] *others*' (Hall, 1995, p. 287).

Structuralism, and in particular the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, constitute the third de-centring of the subject. Here it is the rules of language as a social system that pre-exists and 'speak' the subject and allow the expression of meaning and identity to emerge (Hall, 1995, p. 288). The linguistic turn positioned the subject within a network of unstable meanings, nevertheless it continues to assert the centrality of human culture and its codes as central to practice. The fourth great de-centring of the subject emerged from the work of Michel Foucault and his theorisation of disciplinary power. The regulation and exercise of disciplinary power by large-scale collective institutions intended to produce docile bodies paradoxically individualizes the subject by bearing down more intensely on his or her body (Hall, 1995, p. 289). In Foucauldian thought, what counts as 'environment' is confined to human institutions. We come now to the fifth de-centring, that of Feminism, which was at the forefront of social movements that emerged in the 1960s. Like other emancipatory movements of the time, Feminism was opposed to corporate liberal politics and espoused a politics of social identity that acknowledged gays, lesbians and the social struggles of anti-war and racial minorities. (Hall, 1995, p.290). More radically however (and here the affinities with New Materialism emerge), Feminism's questioning of inside/outside dichotomies and theorising of sexual difference that also focuses on the body as *matter* opens the way for conceiving of different conceptions of the subject and ontologies of practice. Foundational to this questioning was Donna Haraway's conceptualisation of the body as a

‘material-semiotic actor’ (Haraway, 1991, p. 200). More recently, van der Tuin’s extrapolation from Karen Barad’s notion of ‘onto-epistemology’ has extended earlier Feminist conceptions of the subject and practice to an accounting of the physical environment—both organic and inorganic—in a radical de-centring, but not a jettisoning of the (human) subject: ‘New materialists argue that even rationally intuiting a Thing-in-Itself is preceded by embodied encounters, so they do not leave the human subject behind, but speak of the entangled nature of knowing and being’. (van der Tuin, 2014, p. 233)

The notion of knowing and being in which the human subject is only a bit player is not new. As Estelle Barrett notes in her essay in this volume, Indigenous scholars acknowledge the profound interrelationship of material practices and epistemology in Aboriginal cultures—where being, doing and knowing are enfolded and interdependent and where Country or land (as matter) is regarded not as ground or object, but as co-subject (Foley, 2003; Martin, 2003; Kovach, 2005; Martin, 2013). Hence material practices are diffractive, involving intra-actions that enact agential cuts in which human and non-human agents are implicated. As Karen Brad explains, such practices:

*Do not produce absolute separations, but rather cut together-apart (one move). Diffraction is not a set pattern, but rather an iterative (re)configuring of patterns of differentiating-entangling. As such, there is no moving beyond, no leaving the ‘old’ behind. There is no absolute boundary between here-now and there-then. There is nothing that is new; there is nothing that is not new. Matter itself is diffracted, dispersed, threaded through with*

*materializing and sedimented effects of iterative reconfigurings of spacetime mattering, traces of what might yet (have) happen(ed). (Barad, 2014, p. 168)*

In Barad’s schema, matter and the non-human emerge as co-producers and co-actors in practice. Environments, materials, instruments of practice operate in the constant flux of differing or mattering that in praxis produce the oscillation between what is captured as human perception and what is returned to the flow of intra-actions in which both human and non-human actors are mutually implicated. It is through this lens that we suggest the essays in this volume articulate transversality not only as movements between domains of knowledge and the organic and the inorganic, but also as moments of ‘the between’, a shimmering of the perceptible and the imperceptible as double articulations that emerge through and in practice. Such moments are variously articulated in the essays to follow.

In the first essay of the volume ‘Knowing as Distributed Practice: Twenty-first Century Encounters with the Universe’, Maaïke Bleeker studies the ways in which humans transversally participate in the larger material configurations of knowing such as planetariums. The essay decentres the human as a source or master of knowledge production and speaks for the inseparability of the knower and the known, or as Barad has observed, the inseparability of the observed object and agencies of observation. Bleeker discusses the ideas of distributed knowledge in relation to a proposal for a twenty-first century planetarium as developed by Flemish artist Eric Joris and his company CREW. In this essay, planetarium is not a place where

the distant solar system is shown to humans but a transversal space, a technospace, through which the solar system emerges in relation to both enabling technologies and experiencing bodies.

Manning's essay 'For a Pragmatics of the Useless, or The Value of the Infrathin'<sup>1</sup> takes us to the most subtle, transversal between of art, philosophy and thinking as it works persistently to attend to what is almost imperceptible and elusive in these practices. Drawing on Marcel Duchamp's notion of the infrathin and working through the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, Manning offers new ways to grasp what is most essential in art and politics, and in fact in all ecologies of practice.

Terri Bird, in her essay 'More than material: art and the incorporeality of the event', explores the fruitful co-minglings of art and philosophy crucial to new materialist research practices. This essay investigates matter's force and dynamics, or the 'more than material', to frame meaning that reaches beyond the mere matter. It brings into conversation Elizabeth Grosz's materialist philosophy and Scott Mitchell's *New Millenium Fountain*, an installation that works with sunlight enlightening the darkest corners of The Australian Centre for Contemporary Arts (ACCA). Through her analysis Bird shows how the art event transversally works as 'more than material' connecting the material and the incorporeal, signification and sensation.

In the essay 'A Literary Practice for Crises of Ecologies: Tim Winton, Timothy Morton and the writing of the Hyperobject Global Warming in(to) *Eyrie*', David Harris argues for literature as an onto-epistemological practice that can activate forces of life, and invigorate and focus readers' and writers'

ecological sensibility. This ecological sense, Harris argues, enables subjective resistance and renewal amid crises of ecologies. In this way, literature works as what Deleuze and Felix Guattari term 'affective athleticism' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 172). The affective literary athleticism allows transversal and transforming connections to occur between the country, the climate, weather conditions and the bodies of reading and writing.

## *...enables subjective resistance and renewal amid crises of ecologies...*

Julieanna Preston's essay moves the focus to creative writing and sonic experiments. It takes form as a virtual-fictive conversation with Haraway, one of the central figures for New Materialist onto-epistemologies and Posthuman feminisms. Preston's essay 'SPEAK matter, SPEAK!', executed as performance writing, speculates on the different ways in which humans and matter are transversally co-emergent especially in the field of oral or auditive communication/connection. The essay studies, for example, how poor technological reception can bring bodies together rather than keep them at distance.

Kaya Barry, in her essay 'Transversal travels: The relational movements and environmental intensities of packing a bag', takes us to Iceland and Nepal as she discusses the experiences and aesthetics of bag-packing through her net-based artwork.

1 – This is a revised version of an essay previously published in 2016 in *Political Theory* (pp. 1-19). doi: 10.1177/0090591715625877

Barry's essay is sensitive to relational philosophies of body, to the body intensively 'bodying' in relation to its environment (Manning, 2013, pp. 10-15). Through this focus Barry complexifies experiences of travelling, taking them beyond the conventional confines of cultural encounters and contemplation. In this essay, sensations of moving with/in the environment, attuning to it, entangle with concrete everyday experiences and material practices such as packing the bag.

Robyn Sloggett's contribution, 'Interrogating Time and Meaning: Aligning Art Criticism, Conservation, Cultural Context and Materiality', works, as the title explicates, transversally, across several domains of material knowledge and practice. In this essay, Sloggett offers a critical close reading of art criticism concerning Australian Aboriginal art and identifies problems of addressing art beyond one's own epistemological inheritance. She claims that the focus on the materiality of Indigenous art—offered by art conservation, for example—can help to provide a better understanding and proper contextualisation of cultural exigencies and values of the work and, therefore, also help to build a more nuanced and rigorous (cross-cultural) art review.

Finally, in 'Memory, Image, Matter: Trauma and Acts of Un-forgetting' Estelle Barrett suggests that art as a process and aesthetic experience through which the past is given a material presence can help to deal with traumatic events and even overcome them. Barrett is critical of a psychoanalytic, individualising approach to trauma and instead calls for an attending mind, consciousness and memory in relation to, and in coexistence with, the material world, space and place. A number of materialist thinkers, including

Henri Bergson, assist Barrett in this task. In this essay, which concludes the volume, Indigenous artist Deanne Gilson's artworks are approached as an enabling practice between memory, image, and matters of art-making. It is precisely through this multimodal and material transversal practice that healing experiences of un-forgetting can emerge. We invite the reader to explore the wealth of essays in this volume; to learn about transversal practices and the political and ethical considerations they necessarily involve.

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#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

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The authors and editors would like to acknowledge the support of COST IS1307 action New Materialism: Networking European Scholarship on ‘How Matter Comes to Matter’ in the publication of this special issue of *Studies in Material Thinking*.





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**STUDIES IN MATERIAL THINKING**

[www.materialthinking.org](http://www.materialthinking.org)

ISSN: 1177-6234

Auckland University of Technology  
First published in April 2007,  
Auckland, New Zealand.  
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is a peer-reviewed research journal supported by an International Editorial Advisory Group. The journal is listed in: the Australian ERA 2012 Journal List (Excellence in Research for Australia); the Danish Bibliometric Research Index; and the Norwegian register of approved scientific journals, series and publishers.