Material philosophy and the adaptability of materials

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Special Issue Commentary

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Abstract
This reflection on Erik Rietveld's *The Affordances of Art for Making Technologies* addresses, first, what it is to engage in material philosophy and make material propositions and then, second, what different materialities, or rather different ways of handling materialities, allow material philosophers to say. It notes that solidity is not an intrinsic property of any stuff. If only they are handled with care, and loved enough, even wood, concrete and metal turn out to be adaptable.

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In the self-understanding of Western sciences, it is their task to *represent* reality. Technology, by contrast, may *interfere* with what is. Such interference, however, tends to be talked about in *functionalist* terms: technologies are readily presented as means to an end that preceded them. Diverse philosophical voices have contested this set of presumptions. From Bachelard to Hacking, and beyond, scholars have pointed out that the supposed representations of the laboratory sciences result from experiments, which means that they depend on technologically mediated interventions (Abrahamsson et al., 2015; Bachelard, 1941; Hacking, 1983). Haraway (1997), Latour (2002) and many others have amply shown that technologies have more, and therefore often different, effects than those they were designed to have. Strangely, the detailed, empirically rich arguments of these authors are widely ignored. What makes them so scary?

Philosophers do not seek to represent reality and neither do they craft tools meant to solve given problems. Instead, they take a step back. They doubt. Some come back from their retreats with self-assured assertions. Others hold on to the doubt and refuse to take *what there is* for granted. *Things could be otherwise*, they say. It is this particular intellectual style that Erik Rietveld seeks to foster in his inaugural.

There are diverse techniques available for refusing the self-evidence of reality-as-it-is. A first is that of using clearly defined concepts – say *justice*– as a yardstick and *critique* particular social arrangements that fall short of this ideal, by calling them *unjust* (Lötter, 1993). Two, moving on from there, it is possible to imagine what *just alternatives* might look like (Miller, 1999). Three, one may assert that the clearly defined concepts are too narrowly defined and propose *adaptations* of the yardstick. For instance, the *term* 'justice' might have to widen out from legal equality to the possibility of leading a meaningful life (Young, 2011). Four, the given *terms* may also be *critiqued* in a more radical way. Take 'justice' once again: this notion is a crucial building block for current social arrangements and legal systems, which makes it unfit for the articulation of societal alternatives (Foucault, 2012). Five, one may propose *different terms* that allow for other, surprising insights. What, for instance, if instead of seeking 'justice' we were to wonder to what extent social practices are 'caring'? (Tronto, 1993; Mol, 2008)

This fifth intellectual style resonates with *avant garde* tropes in art. Something new is brought into being. Ways of wording are crafted for what was so far unspeakable. It is this philosophical tactic that Erik Rietveld aligns with in his inaugural. He does not seek

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to *represent* reality, nor to craft conceptual tools that are *functional* in that they help to solve readily recognised problems, but neither does he stay stuck in *critique* (Boltanski, 2012). Avant garde philosophy makes something new; it is generative.

But why should philosophers only propose verbal inventions? Now this is where the originality of Rietveld's inaugural lies. He suggests that the results of philosophical work may just as well take a material shape. This means that philosophers do not have to restrict themselves to rekindling terms and weaving sentences. They may also present alternative versions of reality by playing with *stuff*, by crafting *things*, by making *materials* that, rather than functional, are generative. The line with avant garde visual arts becomes thin here. It is not altogether absent, but it takes a tantalisingly elusive shape.

For a start, Rietveld *reads* material 'things' as propositions. He wonders how they are *experienced* by the people who engage with them and which practices they *afford*. And then, he takes a next step and *writes* material 'things', proposes them, presents them. He does this in collaboration with others, primarily his architect brother who has been trained in manipulating *things*, but also with others who temporarily join the collective called *RAAAF*. The inaugural touches on a few examples. What do they propose, what is generated along with them? Have a look – and another. There is something quite particular about these thing-propositions. But what is it? At first sight, they seem sturdy, huge, impressively solid. Is that indeed what they have in common?

Here, a small detour is to the work of another philosopher who plays with the relations between *things* and *thinking*: Michel Serres. Serres is weary of solids, and he considers them overrated. This does not speak from three-dimensional works of art that he has helped to craft; Serres sticks to the art of writing. But as he writes, Serres points out that *materials* fold back into *semiosis* in the form of models. Like metaphors, such models infuse our thinking. Serres' concern is that currently Western thought is disproportionally informed by solids. For instance, about relations we tend to think in transitive ways, modelling them on wooden boxes, where the small box fits within the larger one, but not the other way around. Serres suggests we might just as well – or better – model relations on bags made of cloth, where the large bag, if only it is folded, fits into the smaller one. Alongside cloth, Serres evokes other stuff that is adaptable, or ambiguous, or both. Clouds, marshes and meandering rivers – and other exemplars in which solid, fluid and gaseous state mix or flow over into one another (Serres, 1979; Serres & Latour, 1995).

In the arsenal of RAAAF cloth, clouds, marshes and meanders are absent. Instead, we are confronted with concrete, metal and wood. What to *read* from that? Is Rietveld's material philosophy of a hardened kind, does it stay stuck in solids? Is it – next to a *Serrian*, a feminist suspicion might be raised here –*masculine*? (Neimanis, 2017) Or. Wait a minute. Have another look. And another. Gradually, you may come to appreciate that here, in these artful propositions, solids are loved so much, that they become adaptable, that they transform (Latour, 1996). Why take for granted that solids are rigid, hard, enduring? This can be otherwise.

It *is* otherwise. Look! Sturdy walls are built out of flowing sand by transformative bacteria, challenging the boundaries between loose and solid, living and dead. And that bunker there, made to withstand bombing, is tackled with a saw – a serious saw. Its walls are severed, it is opened up. The loss of its former functionality is underscored by the beauty that emerges as the concrete of the walls is polished until it shines. And if concrete can be sawed and made to shine, it can also be washed away from the steel that arms it. The inaugural has a link to a film that shows how large Nazi structures, made to last, might give way under the force of fluids. If enough fluids are blasted into them with enough fervour, concrete that seems invincible dissolves.

If the originality of Rietveld's *writing* is his arguing for the possibility of material propositions, the strength of his *material philosophy* hides in his love of solids, a love so fierce that it transforms formerly functional things into art, a love so fierce that the solids being loved come to shine, break apart, melt or dissolve. That *things could be otherwise* is not just proposed here. It is presented. It is demonstrated by orchestrating the transformation of – of all things –*hard things*. If huge, solid structures are masculine, RAAAF's way of handling them hardly deserves feminist critique. What about feminist curiosity? This is masculinity of a mutable, transforming – and, who knows, transformative – kind (De Laet & Mol, 2000).

Where to go from here? Which *otherwise* to go for? Further steps might be dreamt up. Not sitting, fine, but why, then, hanging around in an office at all, why not walking outdoors? (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008) Not stable, okay, but how to accommodate the total collapse that might follow on from ecological fragilities? (Stengers, 2019; Tsing et al., 2017) With due respect for craftsmen, sure, but why not muster similar admiration for farmers, cooks and cleaners? (Mol, 2021) Or, another trajectory altogether, what about adding to a material philosophy focussed on structures, one that attunes to *sounds*, and widens out from visual arts to

music? (Moore, 2020) Obviously, this list is just a long shot. And a call. Philosophers, material and otherwise, let us not assert, but query. Stay curious. Keep moving, transforming, recasting, weaving, cooking, singing, crafting, dissolving.

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