

Preface

Movement, Aesthetics, Ontology

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Across the social sciences and humanities, new materialism and neomaterialism are increasingly being used as labels for analytical approaches that seek to reclaim the indispensable and transforming involvement of materialities in everything from political economy to everyday life and the constitution of gender, race and sexuality.¹ Insofar as concepts can be said to always address specific problems, new materialism and neomaterialism engage with the ways in which materialities matter in the formation of lives, the world and research. The concepts also signal an effort to remap how matter is always in formation by drawing on marginal philosophical traditions.² Instead of aspiring to produce novel ontological fundamentals or

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exhaustive definitions of matter, new materialism is concerned with ‘a materiality that materializes’.³ These approaches stress the continued becoming of organic and inorganic materialities in relations, milieus and processes that reactivate their potentials for being and thus often exceed what has already taken place and become known.

One criticism of new materialism and neomaterialism is, unsurprisingly, with the implications of novelty that the concepts imply. Accounts of new materialist thinking have been confronted as to their neglect of the nuanced acknowledgments of materiality in earlier Marxist and feminist theory and some sectors of cultural studies.⁴ In relation to these understandably critical responses to the claim of ‘newness’, the objective of this group of essays is not to celebrate a heroic break from decades of humanistic and social theory. The essays gathered here advance a view that the ‘new’ in new materialisms refers to two things. Firstly, as Diana Coole and Samantha Frost have already pointed out, it refers to the unprecedented scale on which contemporary technologies, sciences and eco-crises produce ways of manipulating, living as and being affected by matter.⁵ Second, and related, we would like to propose that ‘new’ points to the sustained processuality—the never fully foreseeable emergence and unfolding—of any materialisations under scrutiny. This unfolding requires modes which stay attentive to the emergence of the subject matters of the research, so as to be able to actualise, in always somewhat unpredictable ways, the research process.

Let us qualify this proposition about emerging materialisms. The contributions here seek to offer examples of how the generation, distinctiveness and utility of new materialist perspectives spring from the kinds of concepts or reconceptualisations with which they endeavour to rethink the character and status of materialities. Along with other contemporary approaches, new materialisms posit that concepts must be constantly tested and often reshaped in relation to empirical events, the given planes of inquiry, and the twists and turns of the research process. What is perhaps specific to new materialisms is their particular way of understanding the performativity of concepts. Several new materialist approaches have proposed that many established concepts of the human and social sciences (such as agency or human-centered notions of the body) are challenged when research attends to the processuality and activity of various kinds of materialities. The researcher should

also let the concepts she or he works with *re-singularise* in connection with the vibrant, never fully containable processes that are being explored. In the present collection of essays, this takes place, for instance, when concepts drawn from geology and neuroscience attain novel capacities when brought into relation with media art and cinema. From new materialist perspectives, it is the co-affective relations of material, conceptual, historical and social elements that reconfigure spheres of knowledge by way of singularisation.⁶

We also want to emphasise that far from claiming to be thoroughly new, the concepts and problems that new materialist perspectives work with openly resuscitate and modulate previous theorisations concerning bodies, materiality, relations, and process. These may be problems of metaphysics and philosophy (from Marx and Bergson to Heidegger, Haraway and Deleuze-Guattari), poststructuralist theory (from Derrida to Kristeva), specific fields of study (from feminist theory to art and fashion studies and neuroscience), or to the work of such artist-theorists as Jean-Luc Godard and Robert Smithson. In so far as they expand upon and repurpose previous theoretical traditions, new materialist approaches are not announcing a rupture with the past. What motivates many of them is a search for reviving transactions between the potential subsisting in existing bodies of theory, and the present and future prospects—or actuality and virtuality—of contemporary research.

The essays at hand contribute in particular to the transversal exploration of three concepts with complex histories: movement, aesthetics and ontology. These cross-disciplinary concepts can be characterised as central to renewed and emerging materialisms of the past ten years in the sense that they frequently figure and acquire reworked definitions in new materialist research.⁷ Yet, their mutual resonances are a less common starting point. In the present context, the connective tissue of the three concepts stems from the theme of the 4th International Conference on New Materialisms that took place at the University of Turku, Finland, in May 2013. This group of essays grows from presentations and discussions held during and after that conference.⁸

The elaboration of these three notions within new materialist frames brings together a range of emphases and ideas. Movement, in association with social, cultural and feminist analysis, refers to the vibrancy or ontological mobility of all

matter, the agential capacities of nature, and the attendant ethico-political potential attached to materialities. The notion of movement in new materialisms also relates to the rethinking of the dynamic and productive relationality of existence across registers.⁹ The term aesthetics covers reconfigured approaches to sensation, sensorial experience, and their temporal, inter- or amodal features. These concerns have already led to the reappraisal of the roles of language and other signifying systems, which were for decades a prime focus for many in the humanities and social sciences.¹⁰ The renewed interest in the sensory materiality of both human and nonhuman beings has initiated a return to such concepts as affect and experience.¹¹ It also relates to the potential relevance of current neuroscientific findings for cultural analysis.¹² Finally, we suggest that in new materialist frameworks ontology evokes the fundamental co-formation—rather than separability—of being and knowing, natural and cultural, biological and social, matter and thought. For thinkers of new materialisms, ontology signals the ongoing emergence of entanglements, such as ontoepistemology, naturecultures or the nature–culture continuum.¹³

For quite a while, new materialist studies were located most visibly in the social sciences and philosophy.¹⁴ During the last few years, the situation has changed, as more arts and humanities scholars have begun to test new materialist approaches in prominent research projects, publications and conferences.¹⁵ The ultimate objective of the essays collected here is to contribute arts and humanities perspectives to the methodological, analytical and ethico-political development of new materialisms. Indeed, we believe that the distinctive practices of arts and cultural production, issues of aesthetics in relation to art, and ontology in contemporary media cultures raise important questions for new materialisms. It's also clear that because of their distinctly human-centered traditions, arts and humanities face a big challenge in developing the kinds of non human-centric understandings of reality and the human that are so desperately needed in today's technological, ecological, natural-cultural terrains. It is our belief that the scope, methods and ethico-political commitments of arts and humanities fields will fruitfully reconfigure in these processes of (re)new(ed) materialisation.

The seven essays that follow address a range of art practices and cultural phenomena, from film and land art to political analysis and theoretical debates. The

first essay seeks to exemplify how new materialist engagements with movement, aesthetics and ontology might expand methodological thinking and practices in art and cultural studies. By working with Björk's concert documentary *Biophilia Live*, Milla Tiainen, Katve-Kaisa Kontturi and Ilona Hongisto offer the notions of 'framing', 'following' and 'middling' as initial methodological *metamodellings* for the study of relational materialities. In his contribution, Jussi Parikka investigates recent land art by such artists as Martin Howse, Jonathan Kemp, Ryan Jordan and Terike Haapoja. Parikka argues that by innovatively commingling computational processes with geophysical forces, these projects devise a new materialist media art aesthetics that is still embedded in artistic histories. In his view, the projects offer an arts-based parallel to the work of Rosi Braidotti, Brian Massumi and other scholars of new materialisms in highlighting how supposedly human technological cultures are always deeply implicated in the exploitation of more-than-human forces such as the geographical, the geological and the planetary.

In her contribution, Barbara Bolt rethinks the concept of artistic appropriation in and through her material practice as a painter working with Robert Motherwell's famous series 'Elegy to the Spanish Republic' (1949–1991). In Bolt's new materialist take, appropriation does not entail re-producing or representing visual forms. Instead, it emerges as a performative activation of and attention to the imperceptible forces of Motherwell's work that express a 'terrible death that must not be forgotten'. In her drawings and paintings, Bolt harnesses these forces to create another elegy—this time for reconciliation in contemporary Australia. Estelle Barrett's essay demonstrates how being and knowing, ontology and epistemology, are inextricably intertwined in any form of cultural production and creative practice, a claim she says is exemplified in Brian Martin's Indigenous art. After comparing Julia Kristeva's conceptions of art and subjectivity with those of Deleuze and Guattari, she proceeds to offer an interplay between the Freudian concept of cathexis and the more materialist concept of methexis as a means to understand the complex processes of knowledge production that are at once psychic, biological, semiotic and material. According to Barrett, then, knowledge production is ontoepistemological rather than representational.

Building on her concept of the neuro-image and on Karen Barad's notion of diffraction, Patricia Pisters examines the temporal dimensions of what she terms

cosmic cinema. She accounts for the ways in which cinema aesthetically expresses a metaphysics that calls for renewed connections to the elements of planet Earth. Here, new materialism is articulated as the continuously evolving intra-agential entanglement of our bodies, brains and screens. Finally, Cecilia Åsberg, Kathrin Thiele and Iris van der Tuin in their essay navigate the different materialisms based on ontologies of immanence which circulate in contemporary academia. They enquire into the specifically feminist lineages and stakes involved in the development of such new materialisms. By performing a critical conversation between feminist materialist genealogies and object-oriented ontology/speculative realism, they argue that the question of feminism in current materialisms boils down to conceiving of immanence in terms of always located, relational and embodied becomings rather than as a new ontological absolute.

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¹ This collection of essays has been produced in collaboration with the EU COST Action IS1307 New Materialism: Networking European Scholarship on ‘How Matter Comes to Matter’ and the research project on New Materialist methodologies at the School of History, Culture and Arts Studies, University of Turku, Finland.

² See, for example, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (eds), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2010; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2010; Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2010; Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, Polity, Cambridge, 2002.

³ Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, ‘Introducing the New Materialisms’, in Coole and Frost (eds), *New Materialisms*, p. 9.

⁴ See, for example, Sara Ahmed, ‘Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of “New Materialism”’, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2008, pp. 23–39; Nikki Sullivan, ‘The Somatechnics of Perception and the Matter of the Non/human: A Critical Response to the New Materialism’, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3, August 2012, pp. 299–313; Dennis Bruining, ‘A Somatechnics of Moralism: New Materialism or Material Foundationalism’, *Somatechnics*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2013, pp.149–68.

⁵ Coole and Frost, 'Introducing the New Materialisms', p. 4.

⁶ Cf. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2002, 17–19.

⁷ See, for example, Coole and Frost (eds), *New Materialisms*; Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*; Erin Manning, *Relationescapes; Movement, Art, Philosophy*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2009; Penny Florence and Nicola Foster (eds), *Differential Aesthetics: Art Practices, Philosophy, and Feminist Understandings*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2000; Giuliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality and Media*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2014.

⁸ See the conference website <<https://movementaestheticsontology.wordpress.com/>>.

⁹ See, for example, Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*; Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2011; Manning, *Relationescapes*; Erin Manning, *Always More than One: Individuation's Dance*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2011.

¹⁰ See, for example, Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*, Routledge, New York and London, 2007; Martine Beugnet, *Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2007; Derek P. McCormack, *Refrains for Moving Bodies: Experience and Experiment in Affective Spaces*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2013.

¹¹ See, for example, Marianne Liljeström and Susanna Paasonen, *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings: Disturbing Differences*, Routledge, New York and London, 2010; Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (eds), *The Affect Theory Reader*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2010; Marie-Luise Angerer, Bernd Bösel and Michaela Ott (eds), *Timing of Affect: Epistemologies, Aesthetics, Politics*, Diaphanes, Berlin, 2014; Brian Massumi and Erin Manning, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 2014.

¹² See, for example, Patricia Pisters, *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012, Manning, *Always More than One*.

¹³ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2007; Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, Prickly Paradigm Press, Chicago, 2003; Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*; see also Vikki Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2011.

¹⁴ See, for example, Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, *Material Feminisms*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2009; Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, Open Humanities Press, Chicago, 2012 <<http://openhumanitiespress.org/new-materialism.html>>; R. Coleman and J. Ringrose (eds), *Deleuze and Research Methodologies*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2013; Coole and Frost (eds), *New Materialisms*; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

¹⁵ See, for example, Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (eds), *Carnal Knowledge: Toward A 'New Materialism' through the Arts*, I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 2013; Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (eds), *Material Inventions: Applying Creative Arts Inquiry*, I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 2014; Christoph Cox, Jenny Jaskey and Suhail Malik (eds), *Realism, Materialism Art*, Stenberg Press, Berlin, 2015. See also the recent new materialist special issues of *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies*, no. 5, 2014, 'New Materialism and Art', and *Artnodes*, no. 15, 2015, 'Art Matters I', eds Paul Alsina and Ana Rodríguez Granell. In addition, since the first Annual International Conference on New Materialisms, held in Cambridge, United Kingdom, in 2010, the emphasis of the series has been significantly on the arts and humanities—as exemplified by the 2013 conference 'Movement, Aesthetics, Ontology' at the University of Turku, Finland, and the 2015 conference "Transversal Practices: Matter, Ecology, Relationality' at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne. Moreover, new materialisms in the arts and humanities are vividly elaborated in such grand-scale research projects as ISCH-COST 1307 action New Materialism: Networking European Scholarship on 'How Matter comes to Matter', which has over twenty member countries in Europe and beyond, and in Australia, for example through Sydney College of the Arts' research cluster 'New Materialism'.

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