

The Wound In Its Entanglements

Project Description

The artistic research project *The Wound In Its Entanglements* reflects upon the human body in its material entanglements, and centres around the following questions: What is touch within matter? How are bodies materialised? The project is informed by feminist new materialisms' ongoing re-thinking of our material reality, in which a relational and process-oriented approach to matter—including the matter of living bodies—plays an integral part. The project is more specifically guided by the theories of key materialist and feminist scholar Karen Barad and her concepts intra-action/phenomena/agential cut. Seen through Barad's agential realist perspective, bodies themselves "come to matter through the world's iterative intra-activity – its performativity"¹. "Individuals" only exist within particular materializing relations in their ongoing iteratively intra-active reconfiguring. Approaching Barad's performative body as biologically malleable and historicized in response to experience, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's motif of the wound is used as a thinking tool in the project. His use of the term is explicitly temporal, insisting on a "ghostly" causality of the event, where echoes, resonances, and traces of the past have material effects in the form of changing forces on the present and future. As such, The Deleuzian wound is an embodied wound, one that can be seen as realising the history and the future of the body through a "stickiness of the past"—in a claim that historical harms live not only in the body of the individual, but in the intergenerational affectivity of whole communities². The key concern of the project, however, is not to solely "name" these urgencies and motifs, but, in fact to "materialise" the transformed mode of thinking these scholars gesture towards, through the creation of artworks in the form of sculptures and sculptural installations. Utilising a range of materials spanning from bacterial colonies to blood pressure medication to cochineal lakes in mixes that simultaneously change and create, the bodies of art "think" the intra-activity of matter, in the course of realising it.

Background: Feminist New Materialisms

¹ Karen Barad. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward An Understanding Of How Matter Comes To Matter", *Signs: Journal Of Women In Culture And Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 801-831, 824.

² Sara Ahmed. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2004, 33-4.

The labels “new materialism” and “new feminist materialism” have been used by a range of scholars to describe a series of texts that emerged since the 1990s. These texts, by authors such as Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Elizabeth Grosz, Vicky Kirby, and Elizabeth Wilson (and many more) argue, roughly, that the linguistic or cultural turn in feminist theory, cultural theory, and political theory, is insufficient for analysing contemporary politics and dangerous because it leaves questions of biology or “nature” to reductionist, conservative thought. A main ambition of new materialism is to radically rethink the dualisms so central to Western thought (between nature and culture, matter and mind, the human and the inhuman), which always seems to start its analysis from how these oppositions are produced in action itself. Building on Gilles Deleuze and psychiatrist and political activist Felix Guattari’s statement in *A Thousand Plateaus*: “We invoke one dualism only to challenge another. We employ a dualism of models only in order to arrive at a process that challenges all models³.”, new materialism(s) shifts these dualist structures by allowing for the conceptualization of the travelling of the fluxes and to open up active theory formation. The body is an important threshold concept for new materialist scholarship, since it as a philosophical notion bears the marks of a dualistic approach to it, principally conceptualized in Western thought as being opposed to the soul or mind. Overcoming mind-body dualism and revealing how aspects once separated are in fact entangled, are important aspects for this scholarship.

Within this new materialist framework, feminist philosophy has a profound interest in the morphology of change and gives special attention to materiality and processes of materialization (as it has been so much neglected by dualist thought). Feminist new materialisms venture even further in rejecting dualistic partitions and in challenging what is considered fixed identities, discrete entities, and solid objects. What makes the feminist materialisms distinct from other theories in the field is the refusal to see the subject world divided into hierarchies and categories, the importance of maintaining a “we”, and the awareness of the constant transformations and interactions of matter. Asking what materiality matters, some writers explore the entanglements of power, identity, and the self with the material body, the physical environment, and the ecological world, especially in relation to physical suffering and vulnerability, pain, or loss⁴.

³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2013, 20.

⁴ Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman. *Material Feminisms*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008.

Key materialist and feminist scholar Karen Barad deconstructs a series of divisions and categorical oppositions—subject/object, knower/object-to-be-known, human/non-human, amongst others—by proposing an agential realist framework to examine the world with. Deriving her inspiration from quantum mechanics and from the theories of physicist Niels Bohr, in particular, Barad is best known for her theory of agential realism. This agential realist framework moves away from an individualistic atomistic metaphysics, our strong cultural belief in representationalism, our Western tendency to thingify or basically objectify, and a mere discursive-linguistic concept of performativity. It instead pushes us towards a relational understanding of what Barad labels the “intra-action” between subjects and objects in the world, or better put, “phenomena,” as the latter in such a framework are already interconnected before being agentially separated⁵. Seen through such an agential realist perspective, bodies themselves “come to matter through the world’s iterative intra-activity – its performativity”⁶. “Individuals” only exist within particular materializing relations in their ongoing iteratively intra-active reconfiguring and are not individually determinate.

Simply put, Barad views relationships between the social, political, and discursive and physical matters as complex entanglements in performative configurations or materializations of the world. Her claims are supported by epigenetic research, which suggests that an individual’s environment, both physical and social, manifests in biology at the molecular level. Scholar Noela Davis has recently demonstrated in relation to epigenetics, that our very bodies are rich compositories of past experiences, and these experiences serve as much more than haunting memories, but rather play out through patterns of illness and social behaviours.⁷ Furthermore, even before a particular individual can be said to exist, their genetic and environmental inheritances are already prepared to influence their developmental pathways: there is not first a biological body which is then worked in by a physical or social environment.

An infinite number of past experiences, habits, and memories enact our particular present. By asking questions about what wider materialities are at play in any event, the assemblages of

⁵ Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 815.

⁶ Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 824.

⁷ Noela Davis. *The Sociality of Biology: Epigenetics and the Molecularisation of the Social*, paper presented at “Mattering: Feminism, Science, and Materialism”, City University of New York.

violence and negation, which are different every time, become visible. The ethical implications of such enfolding are that the living present introduces a responsibility to the past in the present “not as a specific demand from a particular past commitments, but rather as an awareness that the present cannot absolve itself selectively of the past”⁸. Writer and scholar Sara Ahmed might call this the “stickiness of the past”, such that historical harms live not only in the body of the individual, but in the “intergenerational affectivity of whole communities.”⁹

The term wound is explicitly temporal in Deleuze, who consistently refers to the aspect of time his work privileges as caesura, break, cut and wound—something akin to what feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz calls “the nick of time”.¹⁰ The priority he accords this nick of time, this temporal wound, does not follow from a common-sense understanding of temporal anteriority, such as the observation that scarification follows from, and is a direct causal consequence of, a prior wound. Rather, Deleuze advocates a distinctively new understanding of both time and the relation between cause and effect in *Logic of Sense*. There the event is explicitly understood as an effect rather than a cause. He insists on a more “ghostly” causality obtaining on the level of the virtual/transcendental, which also haunts and at least partly produces the actual. When Deleuze treats the event as synonymous with the wound, the wound is both temporal and transcendental, rather than an empirical event that happens. For him, the event never actually happens or is present; it is always that which has already happened or is going to happen. As such, his manner of conceptualising the relation between wound and scar is not one of empirical antecedent or spatial succession, and, unlike Hegel, there is no healing or overcoming of this transcendental wound, i.e., the future that is perennially to come, the pure past that never was.

The living present re-imagines our reliance on linear, chronological time, offering instead a dynamic engagement with temporality, one where the past is continually re-imagined in its present invocations. The metaphysical implications of such a move lie in its recognition that a living present is always a live present: it is an enactment of the processes of growth, change, movement, and touch that characterizes our human bodies (and more). Each of these

⁸ James Williams. *Gilles Deleuze's Philosophy of Time: A Critical Introduction and Guide*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011:18.

⁹ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 33-4.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Grosz. *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2004: 244.

processes is temporal not in its adherence to an externally imposed timeline, but to its own making of time as the becoming of materiality. A past whose material effects continue to act as living, changing forces on the present and on the future.

Project Description

The key concern of the project is in fact to “materialise” the transformed mode of thinking the feminist new materialist scholars gesture towards, through the creation of artworks such as sculptures and sculptural installations. The chosen method is to utilise a range of materials in mixes that simultaneously change and create the individual entity and the collective whole, both conceptually and materially. The aim is to create bodies of art that “think” the intra-activity of matter, in the course of realising it, and thus reflects upon how the concept of touch constitutes who and what we are.

As my approach is relational, the following two focuses coexist and interact throughout the project’s timespan.

The first stage of the artistic research is an exploration of matter and the notion of touch within matter through Barad’s theories of agential realism. Inquiring into the first research question “What is touch in matter?” begins here, in a hands-on and process-related exploration of different materials in the studio and experimentation across the different workshops of the Oslo National Academy of Arts. Combining materials such as plants, minerals, metals, and elements from the human body in sculptural series, I will take the history of the classification system (of the material world) and the philosophy of classification as a starting point whilst exploring the different material stages and connections. This exploration will continue by creating *mixes* of materials within sculptures (and smaller parts of sculptures) in which identity will be researched as changeable and as complex fluctuating material relations. These *mixes* will consist of different states of materials; liquid and powdered materials in combination, as well as materials that conceptually have the potential to interact (intra-act). The artistic research will focus on showing a material’s many narratives of coming-into-existence by making visible its cultural contexts and histories, and/or its changing material processes. In short, the artistic research reflects upon how “touch” (through a thick present) constitutes who and what we are.

The second stage furthers this research into the human body and explores the complex entanglements of the social, political, and physical matters in its materialization. The research question “How are bodies materialised?” is explored more thoroughly at this stage. Seeing the human body as relational and expressing its environment—the project looks at what drives health or illness, and explores concepts such as epigenetics, immunity, toxic bodies, and inflammation. The method used is process-related and relational as previously mentioned, different materials and sculptural “bodies” are explored in processes together, both conceptually and materially, aiming to “think” the intra-action that the project refers to and to reflect upon the materialisation of bodies.

Deleuze’s embodied wound is used as an accompanying image/thinking tool in the research.

The resulting artworks will be presented in different exhibitions throughout the project’s timespan. The artworks will also be documented and presented online.

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