

APPROACHING THE MATERIAL-DISCURSIVE VORTEX

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of discussions around New Materialisms, art-based research can provide a rich expertise in linking the material and the discursive realm through a combined conceptual and practical approach. Its inventiveness in the field of methods suggests that it can be a good source for finding productive ways of confronting the „material-discursive vortex“ and immersing oneself in it. This paper presents specific methods, their open-ended development and their application from within the plastic arts. These methods were used to collectively explore and evolve multiple interwoven layers of understanding and working with „stuff“, especially focussing on material performances and activities. The mentioned layers span from intimate studio work to shared bodily experiences, collective contextualizations in contemporary discourses and further to the wider networks of materiality. The presented insights and examples are drawn from recent art-based research projects and theoretical-practical seminars.

There are different claims of how material configurations and the mental realm work together. This relationship can become especially relevant when discussing issues of materiality— e.g. when investigating different layers of material configurations like formation processes, the wider networks of spatial, historical and cultural contexts, or the relations to other knowledge areas that influence the present situation.

When dealing with the relationship between the material and the mental, one quickly feels the strong pull of a vortex, which leads to a meandering in different depths around questions such as: What does a specific material configuration or property possibly mean? How exactly is this meaning created? Is it only important to me? Is the meaning more important than the material configuration? Can it exist independently? Do meanings need rooting in the material realm? Or are meaning and matter in a way the same? What is the role of the material, the body, the mental pre-formation in processes of material signification? Are such processes rather approached with the help of theoretical frameworks or through direct bodily interaction?

In this short paper I can of course not provide satisfying answers to all of these questions, but in order to help approaching them, I would like to introduce two viable theoretical positions. First, I want to bring back into memory the currently popular position by Karen Barad concerning what she considers the 'material-discursive'. Thereupon I will present a less known concept by David Bohm called 'soma-significance'.

Finally, I will introduce some collective methods used in art-based research to jump into the loops of the 'material-discursive' and 'soma-significance' with the hope of being able to use them in a fruitful way.

Barad's 'material-discursive process'

The relationship between the material and the discursive is one of mutual entailment. Neither is articulated or articulable in the absence of the other; matter and meaning are mutually articulated. Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other. (Barad 2003, p. 822)

In this explanation, Barad claims that the material and the discursive express each other, but they are not the same. They shall have a close relationship with each other. They are supposed to be different aspects—but aspects of what? Barad doesn't seem to be very clear in this passage. Also, she uses discourse and meaning more or less as synonyms. She brings them too close to each other. 'Discourse', she writes earlier in the same text, 'is that which constrains and enables what can be said. Discursive practices define what counts as meaningful statements.' (Barad 2003, p. 819) So, They are not meaning as such. Nevertheless, we can maybe agree for now, that matter and meaning are somehow entangled and that discursive practices continuously reconfigure the material world and are as such 'always already material'. (Barad 2003, p. 822)

Bohm's 'soma-significance'

An earlier account of how matter and meaning are inseparable poles of the same flow was presented by theoretical physicist and philosopher David Bohm. He introduced the notion of 'soma-significance', where soma stands for anything physical like e.g. body, environment, particle, etc. and significance for meaning. He explains that like in a magnetic field, these two poles can't be broken apart but constitute the points of passage of a constant flow, that is continuously present. To describe it a bit further in his own words:

[...] nothing exists in this process except as a two-way movement, a flow of energy, in which meaning is carried inward and outward between the aspects of soma and significance, as well as between levels that are relatively subtle and those that are relatively manifest. (Bohm 2003, p. 164)

Subtle in this context describes something that is finely woven, like e.g. meanings are woven together and enfolded in each other. And the *manifest* literally stands for what can be held in the hand, the tactile. The inward and outward movement he is talking about can e.g. be understood as the transmission of a perception into the body and brain via physical and chemical processes. Through these processes states and structures are changed and eventually lead to an outward movement, muscle stimulation and somatic activity that also leads to external change.

On yet another level of explanation, Bohm proposed a scheme in which he argued for the unity in the mutual enfolding of matter, energy and meaning. He pointed out that 'there is only one flow, and a change of meaning is a change in that flow. Therefore any change of meaning is a change of soma, and any change of soma is a change of meaning.' (Bohm 2003, p. 163)

What is interesting to note is that Bohm explicitly considers the perception and integration of new meanings as creative acts. The integration of new meanings do not only exert some influence on other meanings by reorganization and consequent enfoldings. But through the change of the overall constellation of meanings they also find a way of expressing this change on the somatic level. Thus, a new meaning expresses itself in changes of the mental as well as the physical situation (including body and environment) with unforeseeable further consequences.

But what does all this mean for the arts? How does this influence the arts' diverse accounts of materiality which have shifted more into the public attention during the last years and especially during the discussions around speculative realism and new materialisms?

Are the discursive practices of the sciences the same as those of the arts? What about the awareness of these two disciplines of soma-significance? In the arts, the implicit awareness of soma-significant processes seems to be widely spread. Concerning the material-discursive, there seem to be quite some different approaches around.

Methods used in 'Material Aktiv Denken'

In the art-based research project 'Liquid Things' and especially in a workshop called 'Material Aktiv Denken' we tried to consciously apply and take advantage

of the concepts presented so far.¹ Let me briefly give you some insights into a few methods that have been used.

The workshop took place in 2013 in collaboration with the research group 'Enactive Environments' at the Zurich University of the Arts.² 'Material Aktiv Denken' is a suitable example because of the double meaning of its title in German. First, it means 'to think materials as active entities', and second, it means 'to think actively with materials about materials'. This second meaning adds performativity to materials and underlines the embodiment and material basis of thinking itself – be it in practices or interactions and it emphasizes the need for direct and personal experiences.

For this event we invited participants from various fields like e.g. Philosophy, Art, art theory, architecture, design and material sciences. We made sure from the beginning that we do not deal with materials without the materials themselves – be it in the form of stuff, materials, things or material systems etc. In order to make this group work together in a sufficiently unhierarchic way and without borders of disciplines, and to really merge material and conceptual processes, we had to come up with special conditions and activities.

To jump into this complex field of our topic and to avoid roles rooted in different disciplines, we invited everybody to bring a representative material with active properties to introduce themselves with. This way, we achieved a start that



involved everybody in direct material experiences. To give you an impression about these materials: The participants brought stuff as diverse as e.g. the leaves of a tree, photonic crystals, petrified sea urchins, chocolate clouds, silly putty, electroluminescent foils, paper, a printed photograph and glowing sugar. On the second day of the workshop we came back to this material and gave every

¹ The project Liquid Things (2012-2016) was funded by the Austrian Science Fund in the framework of PEEK.

² A more in-depth description of the workshop can be found in Franinovic (2017).

participant an opportunity to make his or her material act. This resulted in a very interesting situation. On the first day, the materials were often described and categorized as being raw stuff, an explicit material or an object. On the second day, when the materials were supposed to act, this distinction disappeared completely. While on the first day the activity of the materials was not so specifically treated, the second day mercilessly showed what the materials were able to do – unless the activity took place in another time frame and the presented material entity was only the result of a longer active process.

Fig. 1: Participants letting their materials act and/or telling their stories.

Another method that we used was called ‘Extended-Conceptual-Speed-Dating’. Initially, this is a method by Brian Massumi and Erin Manning that makes people discuss a text quickly in ever changing couples. For our purpose we changed quite some important factors. The initial setup of people discussing in couples was kept, but this doesn’t happen in a circle but at a long table. This table we covered with a huge piece of paper on which the participants were supposed to draw, make notes or use or position additional objects/stuff. Like in the original version we set a strict time limit for the discussions – in our case 8 mins. After one period, the participants on one side of the table had to move over one seat to face a new person and the conversations started over, dealing with the exact same topic. The stationary participants used white markers while their mobile partners each used a distinctive color. Each individual conversation left traces on the paper surface and those traces were used to influence and facilitate the following conversation. This way, the individual backgrounds and selective perceptions of each participant in combination with changing partners were interlinked. The discussions reached a high intensity because of the described circumstances and were even more energetic due to the limited time frame. The interwoven flows of discussions were later reconstructed by the whole group through the traces and specific colors used on the surface.

From our workshop reader – which included texts by Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Manuel DeLanda, Alfred Gell, J. J. Gibson, Tim Ingold, Lambros Malafouris, Brian Massumi, Jens Soentgen and Hans Peter Hahn, Andrew Pickering and Pieter-Paul Verbeek – we chose two: Tim Ingold’s ‘Bringing things to life: Creative Entanglements in a world of materials’ (Ingold, 2010) and Lambros Malafouris’ ‘At the Potter’s Wheel: An Argument for Material Agency’ (Malafouris, 2008). These two were discussed and processed against each other. The Extended-Conceptual-Speed-Dating-Session marked a very intense point of reference for the whole workshop. All further activities and experiments necessarily related to this collective experience.

Fig. 2: Diagrams/Notes of the Extended-Conceptual-Speed-Dating session (left) and participants reconstructing the conversations (right).



Another exercises was based on a Spaces-and-Actions-Matrix also involving some speed-dating features. With this exercise we tried to extend the fields of



associations, situations and stories. At different moments of the workshop, we already took time to let the materials' stories evolve. For example in the introduction or when we let materials act and of course during innumerable experiments which can't be described her. Together with all participants we composed a matrix of different locations and actions. In couples the participants

had to choose two written dimensions: one location and one activity, in addition to a third one, given by a material physically present on a table between them. Through this third dimension the Spaces-and-Actions-Matrix was a very powerful extension to how this matrix approach was usually performed. Our participants had to sketch or describe imaginary stories by drawing or with few words involving the three dimensions on a piece of paper and put it back onto the matrix on the board. After ten minutes, participants would switch to another combination of dimensions, a new material and a new brainstorming partner. When the matrix was fully populated, each participant presented his or her favorite story to the group.

Fig. 3: Participant explaining some results after Spaces-and-Actions-Matrix-Activity.

This short insight into a few used methods hopefully rendered them understandable in the sense that they were opened up for adaption to different needs, topics and situations. And hopefully the short explanations showed how the material and the mental were used as a whole to negotiate the topic of material activity. Luckily the ambiguity and openness of this term was preserved by not killing it with an ultimate definition.

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