

Material Thinking and the Agency of Matter

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In the theory of means and ends that dominates our contemporary understanding of the artistic process, we tend to focus on the instrumental use of tools and materials to make an artwork. According to this view, the artist and craftsperson is the one who exercises mastery over his/her tools and materials to produce an artwork. In harnessing means to ends, the artist justifiably can sign her/his name as the one who has made or caused a work of art to come into being.

In his essay ‘The question concerning technology’ (1977), Heidegger lays the foundations for a different relation to technology and to matter, a way of thinking that helps us reconsider the artistic relation in a post human age. Where we have come to accept the view that humans use tools materials and methods to achieve an artistic end, Heidegger makes the claim that four ways of being responsible let art emerge. In the example of the making of the silver chalice, Heidegger identifies the responsible elements involved in the process as matter, aspect and circumscribing bounds (Heidegger 1977: 6). Together with the artist, these ways of being responsible do not make an artwork, since art, is not concerned with making. Rather, they enable or bring-forth something into appearance.

In his discussion of indebtedness and responsibility and later in his elaboration of *techne* as *poiesis*, Heidegger suggests a different relationship or engagement than that of instrumentality. For Heidegger it is *techne*, through art and handcraft that humans participate in conjunctions with other contributing elements in the emergence of art. In Heidegger’s use of the term “concernful dealings”, there is the suggestion that the relationship between humans and the ready-to-hand involves an ethics other than the ethics of mastery.

Heidegger’s discussion of responsibility and indebtedness provide us with quite a different way to think about artistic practice. In the place of an instrumentalist understanding of our tools and material, this mode of thinking suggests that in the artistic process, objects have agency and it is through the establishing conjunctions with other contributing elements in the art that humans are co-responsible for letting art emerge.

When Heidegger was writing his ‘Technology’ essay between 1949 and 1954, the possibility of attributing agency to objects was, at least in the west, largely unthought. However in a post-human context the work of contemporary philosophers of Science, Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway, posit the argument that “objects” are actors with agency. This emphatic assertion enables us to revisit the relationship between the artist, the tools of production and the materials of production and recast this relationship.

Haraway introduces the ‘power-charged social relation of “conversation”’ (Haraway 1991: 198). In this conversation, she contends, the world is not raw material for use by humans (Haraway 1991: 198) Haraway argues that the agency of the world is central for revisioning the world and refiguring a “different” politics of practice whereby the tools of practice are not used merely used to achieve an end and matter is no longer a resource to be used by humans in order to make an artwork. The central term in Haraway’s elaboration is the material-semiotic actor. This actor may be human or non-human, machine or non-machine.¹ What is critical to her position is that the material-semiotic actor actively contributes to the production. Thus an “object of knowledge” is no longer a resource, ground, matrix, object, material or instrument to be used by humans as a means to an end. Rather an object of knowledge is an ‘active, meaning-generating axis of the apparatus of bodily production’ (Haraway 1991: 200).

Haraway’s notion of the material-semiotic actor grew out of her engagement with writer Katie King’s “apparatus of literary production”. In King’s schema, the apparatus of literary production is the matrix that spawns “literature”. Literature emerges at the intersection of art, business and technology (Haraway 1991: 200). In this ensemble, language is as much an actor as is the author. As Haraway sees it:

King’s objects called “poems”... are sites of literary production where language also is an actor independent of intentions and authors, bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes. Their boundaries materialize in social interaction. (Haraway 1991: 200-201)

In this way, Haraway attends to the relations and forces that take place within the very process or tissue of making. As she makes clear, these are some of the ‘lively languages that actively intertwine in the production of literary value’ (Haraway 1991: 210).

In Haraway’s theorization of the material-semiotic actor—with its emphasis on language as an actor independent of intentions, and bodies as material-semiotic generative nodes—enables us to rethink the artistic relation. In this encounter, the human is no longer outside of the assemblage directing the proceedings. The human being becomes just one material-semiotic actor engaged in complex conversation with other players,

The dialogical and emergent nature of literary production resonates with Edward Sampson’s (1999) notion of the “acting ensemble”. For him, the acting ensemble presents a dialogical construct that takes into account the emergent quality of creative practice. He would argue that creativity, like intelligence, is the property of the acting ensemble, not the individual. The acting ensemble takes in the totality of the acting environment. We

are, Sampson proposes, ‘woven together with context’. He speaks of ‘embodied interactive emergence’, arguing that the acting ensemble is characterized by its emergent property. This removes the focus from the acting individual and places it in the relations between actors. In this shift from the individual artist to the relations between the individual body, the social body and the material conditions of making (say a painting), the actors can include paint, the canvas, type of support, the weather, the wind and gravity as well as discursive knowledges.ⁱⁱ

Brian Massumi’s description of the relation between the woodworker, the wood and the plane supports this focus on the agency of the matter. In this relation the signs in the wood are not passive, even if their action is slower and their force less active than the tool or the human. In the encounter, which Brian Massumi defines as the “hand-to-hand combat of energies” we can no longer focus on form. Rather what emerges:

. . . is a dynamism, composed of a number of interacting vectors. The kind of “unity” it has in no way vitiates that multiplicity—it is precisely an interaction between a multiplicity of terms, an interrelation of relations; an integration of disparate elements. (Massumi 1992:14)

This focus on the acting ensemble rather than the artist as the locus of art enables us to come closer to an understanding of the dynamism of material practice and to the radicality offered by the notion of material thinking. In this dynamism, the outcome cannot be known in advance. Thus although we may have some awareness of the potential of a tool or a piece of wood—for example, through previous dealings with wood and tools—every new situation brings about a different constellation of forces and speeds. The wood may be a bit harder, the tool sharper or blunter and our own energies more or less focussed. Thus our relation to technical things is inevitably characterized by a play between the understandings that we bring to the situation and the intelligence of our tools and materials. This relation is not a relation of mastery but one of co-emergence.

I would like to argue that contemporary artists often become so pre-occupied with intentionality, meaning and making an artwork, they tend to reduce their materials and tools to a means to an end. In this paper I have presented a challenge to this way of thinking and acting. I have proposed that creative practice can be conceived of as a performance in which linkages are constantly being made and remade. Whilst each actor has the same praxiological status, each has its own character and contribution to make as part of the work of art.

References

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ⁱ See also Bruno Latour's elaboration of objects as actors, particularly his article 'Mixing Humans and Nonhumans Together: the Sociology of a Door Stopper' (1998). In his theorizing, Latour conceives of objects as lieutenants who have been delegated to carry out particular functions. Thus he argues that what defines our social relations is in large measure prescribed back to us by nonhumans. In this, he continues, 'knowledge, morality, craft, force, sociability are not properties of humans but of humans accompanied by their retinue of delegated characters' (Latour 1988:301).

ⁱⁱ Haraway distinguishes between actors and actants. Actors have character, whilst actants operate at the level of function (Haraway 1992:331). In that sense, it may be suggested that actors with their own particularities contribute to actants, which are structured according to what they do. Thus humans and non-humans become part of the 'functional collective that makes up an actant' (Haraway 1992:331). In Heidegger's example, silver smithing could be seen to be the actant bringing together a collective of actors including the silver, equipment, chemicals and the artist(s) in productivity.