

ART, MEDIATION AND CONTEMPORARY ART EMERGENT PRACTICES

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Abstract

The emergence of new, social and creative media practices has added to a disciplinary mash up, drawing participants from, amongst others, computer science, engineering, visual arts, science studies, literature, philosophy, film and media studies. The question of emergent practices is taken up in the work of Andrew Pickering. In *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency and Science* (1995), he writes about temporally emergent forms in experimental science laboratories. He makes a strong case for a re-conceptualization of research practice as a 'mangle,' an open-ended, evolutionary, and performative interplay of human and non-human agency. While Pickering's ideas originated in science and technology studies, the concept of 'mangle' captures what he describes as an entanglement between the human and the material.

Key words: emergent practices, Pickering, social sciences, 'mangle' captures, creative practices.

As my colleague, Chris Slater on our ISEA panel, ART, MEDIATION AND CONTEMPORARY ART : EMERGENT PRACTICES (SYDNEY, 2013) commented, 'The recent "new materialist" shift that Janis Jeffries references on this panel that is taking place in the arts, humanities and social sciences seems at first radical: a new kind of "ontological theatre" in a world of continual becoming (Pickering); a universe in which self-sufficient objects "withdraw from us" and our "correlationist" bent of defining the world in relation to human subjects (Harman and Meillasoux) and finally, the confrontation with "vibrant matter" and the "politics of thingness" (Bennett) seems poised to remedy the long standing obsession with discourse, language and theory without grounding that has long plagued the humanities (and indeed, with conceptualism, the arts)'. My concern is not so much with mediation (as in the title of the panel for ISEA 2013) but rather with emergent practices and material agency.

Though the (re)turn to studies of materiality and its interference with research processes is a major achievement of science studies, it is in Pickering's work simply a point of departure. The question posed is how materiality should be considered within explanations of research that cannot be reduced to 'pure' scientists' accounts of their work. In Pickering's view, neither material nor

human agency should be privileged within scientific accounts, but rather both reveal different influences which are temporally emergent from ongoing practice as worked through in a lab. Pickering calls it temporally emergent practice and he specifies that it occurs at the technological interface in response to what he calls "material agency".

Pickering is identified with the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK) discipline. In his work, he seeks a real-time understanding of scientific practice as we might seek a real-time understanding of arts practices. The question he poses: so what happens when we are actually engaged in a task in the moment of its happening, is co-connected to what might occur within an artists' studio. He calls the place where work happens the "performative idiom," and within this place agency is the driving force for accomplishment.

One can start from the idea that the world is filled with agency. "The world... is continually doing things, that bear upon us... as forces upon material beings" [1]. His ideas can be summarized in terms of an entanglement between the human and the material and therefore, practiced culturally and historically as I outline below. In addition, scientists and artists spend time dealing with this force of agency, which, he claims, may come from within or outside of the human realm. For Pickering, agency is the ability to do things, and intentionality is the ability to set agency in motion, on both micro and macro levels; it is the desire to do [2]. I think it is safe to say that human goal setting has no counterpart in the technological world. Our desires are temporally emergent as we work alongside and co-operate with things of unlike kinds, whether through other disciplines (across the arts and sciences) or the machines through which we create our social networks and virtual collaborations. Pickering argues that the difference between people and machines is not found in the things we do or the quality of those things (a human will never be able to do what an electron microscope does is his example), but in the ability to change or ignore plans within the situatedness of our endeavours and research projects.

Tuning and the Mangle of Practice

"Tuning," allows goals to be met when things do not go as planned – it is the force behind the action in situated action [3]. Like other practice theorists, Pickering defines the concept of practice as a

cultural and historical activity, which is "the work of cultural extension and transformation in time" [4].

Pickering's "tuning" metaphor is also helpful in that it invokes the sense of shared adjustment. A technology and a culture, with all its components must similarly work toward a mutual "tuning," which Pickering suggests has to proceed through repeated and routinized practice that occurs over time, giving rise to experiences that can be modified and changed [5].

Until something is done and happens, we cannot predict with certainty that it will happen – it is unpredictable. This is the temporal nature of the mangle. Neither success nor failure is guaranteed beforehand, and obstacles do not exist until we face them head on.

If scientists do not simply fix their goals once and for all in a predetermined manner, then neither do artists. The process of "tuning" is as powerful for science as it is for practice based research in the arts and humanities. "Tuning" and a "truth to materials" is where I want to turn next under the guise of a 'new materialism'.

The Material Turn: Body, Process, Time

Though there is a growing world of literature that deals explicitly with the subjects of materiality and material culture, it may appear that there is hardly anything to say about materials. Indeed Salter (ISEA panel 2013), noted that "the new materialism is something of an misnomer: a conglomeration of different intellectual traditions that have little to do with each other and have radically different political and epistemological stakes, yet seem to be called forth as a new kind of turn".

The concept of new materialism is increasingly to be located within the flows of specific areas of cultural and critical thought. Its "rhythms of arrival and departure", to borrow Brian Massumi's expression [6], as well as connections with concepts, are becoming increasingly regular and rich in intensity across current cultural, social and feminist theory and digital media culture.

Nonetheless, in the work of Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt [7], questions are asked as to how the nature of artistic practice and the notion of "truth to materials" begins to have an impact on what might be understood as the 'new materialism' within artistic and creative practice. There is, as Slater points out and as the essays in Barrett and Bolt's antholo-

gy argue, a theoretical onslaught that presents a case for there to be much more in the world than representations, signifying structures and ideologies — that non-human things exist, independently of us, and that for us to understand matter and embodiment, we need to see it as active, dynamic and stemming from the primacy of relations.

The human view of the transformation of matter into form in what western artists have called “truth to materials” was first articulated in 1911 by the English art critic Roger Fry, who claimed that in order to get at material beauty it is “necessary to respect the life and quality of the material itself” [8]. Art, or those practices which reference material and visual culture, is indeed a material practice and that materiality, it is argued here, lies at the core of creativity. As Poe suggests, if there is a humanistic view that art comes into being as a “human creation of things, then this view of art sees humans as the active creator in the creation of things” [9]. Even as far back as Heidegger [10], a material was thought to be matter which was not dumb or mute but which artists worked with (and not on) in a collaborative relationship. In fact, Heidegger suggested that there is a co-responsibility and indebtedness between the artist, tools of production and material as matter which can lead to a view of art as a co-collaboration of care and ethical conduct.

Heidegger’s ‘praxical knowledge’ and his theoretical ideas that formed the material basis of knowledge provided a philosophical framework for understanding the acquisition of human knowledge as emergent. As a consequence, we can understand knowledge as emerging through material processes developed in time and built on tacit experience and logic which cannot be predetermined in advance.

This takes us back to Pickering and his accounts of switching from representational accounts of scientific culture to his observations of what scientists do in real time in their laboratories. His observations make the reader aware of how the materiality of scientific practice needs to be more fully explained. Scientists are not simply the mediators who represent the real world, neither are there are ‘facts and things’ out there waiting to be discovered and turned into ‘knowledge’. Pickering believes that the world is full of agency and that the world is constantly doing things. The point being that doing things, whether in a laboratory or in a studio, gives rise to

performative action or in Pickering’s terms, a ‘performative idiom’. A “performative idiom,” then is more attentive to activity than to knowledge alone, and could surpass the limitations of the “representational idiom” that is common in the scholarly appraisal of science. Pickering advocates the move to a performative idiom which enables him to thematise the agency of machines, objects, instruments and human beings. These elements when brought together are dynamic, open (perhaps even open-ended), and suggest the emergent nature of scientific practice itself. During scientific practice if things do not work, goals have to be shifted and accommodations made in the very “plane of practice itself” [11]. Pickering’s insistence on such an emergent, temporal, and performative understanding of practice characterizes a new, practice-oriented cultural studies of science which changes over time. Scientific practice involve a process of “tuning” or “delicate material positioning” in which material agency emerges through an interaction among parts of the material environment -- some of which are human [12].

In this discourse, material as matter has as much agency as the scientist whose individual agency works not on but in dialogic exchange with materials. New materialism allows for the study of the two dimensions in their entanglement: the experience of a piece of art is made up of material as matter, and matter as meaning. The material dimension creates and gives form to the discursive, and vice versa. Similar to what happens with an artwork, new materialism sets itself to rewriting events that are usually only of interest to natural scientists. Here it becomes apparent that a new materialist take on “nature” will be shown to be transposable to the study of “culture” and vice versa.

When we think about the materials that make up the term “fiber art” for example (textile art, soft sculpture or a name which varies according to time, place, history and culture) then we can rethink sisal, rope, burlap, handspun fleece, raw silk, thick cotton, strands of wool, pulp and paper as types of living, organic matter which have powerful agency in themselves. Such materials play a co-evolutionary role in the production of artistic work as the material body of the artist that enables the art (as a production of that work) to come into being.

Metaphors of the Mind: What can we know?

Together in a co-evolutionary sense of being entangled together, material – the stuff itself, the artist’s body – come together in the production of work as new knowledge, a way of knowing the world as co-inhabitants of being more conscious of living, being and occupying their spaces and places. For example, in “Metaphor of the Mind: Art Forms as a mode of thinking and a way of being”, Danielle Bouter [13] argues for the creative practice based in a studio as a place, not for a kind of thinking where answers are found, but where questions are posed, situations are contemplated and experienced, reflected upon and re-imagined. The question now becomes, “What can we know”?

There is a further extension to body and world which is that materials, the stuff of matter, play a co-evolutionary role in the production of artistic work. The material body of the artist enables the art (as a production of that work) to come into being. In his essay, “The Visible and the Invisible” [14], Merleau-Ponty refers to the lived body and the world as flesh, not inert matter, but “perpetual pregnancy, perpetual parturition, generativity and generality, brute essence and brute existence, which are the nodes and the anti nodes of the same ontological vibration” [15]. It is the potency of Jane Bennett’s work on vibrant matter [16] that brings material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things together. What is at issue here it that a vital-material ecology embraces the complexity of bodies and embodiment in ways that mangle and entangle all kinds of emergent practice yet to be fully formed.

References and Notes

1. Andrew Pickering, *The Mangle of Practice, Time, Agency and Science*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995. p.6).
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3. Pickering (1) p.20.
4. Pickering (1) p.5.
5. Pickering (1) p.20.
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15. Merleau-Ponty (14),pp. 248-249
16. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010).