

TRANSFORMING THE PHYSICALITY OF EMOTION

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Where do emotions reside? Are they the sole property of the body or do they resonate in the interstitial spaces between the material world and ephemeral realms? I propose that emotions reside in the object, physical and virtual. In my artwork, I juxtapose objects with video projection. The object maintains a powerful reference with a cultural and social meaning, while multiple video projections intervene.



Against the Current, Joan Truckenbrod, Video/Multimedia Installation, Full Size Hospital Bed with Video Projection of Body Tumbling in Stream with Salmon Run, Sound. Copyright Joan Truckenbrod.

Where do emotions reside? Are they the sole property of the body or do they resonate in the interstitial spaces between the material world and ephemeral realms; in invisible but palpable electronic spaces, in virtuality, in spiritual and ancestral realms in indigenous cultures?

Developing research in affective computing aspires to create computing devices that embody emotions, - recognizing and responding to emotions expressed in people's faces, gestures and stances. Emotion is

fundamental to human experience, influencing cognition, perception, and everyday tasks such as learning, communication, and even rational decision-making. In the field of *Emotion Design* can we instigate spontaneous emotions? Is there an electronic mimesis that can empathize with the user?

The physical body is not the sole proprietor of emotions, rather, they reside in objects. Emotions emanate from the material world. Objects are imbued with power - "thing power" as described by Jane Bennett in her book *Vibrant Matter*. She proposes that objects embody a vibrancy of their own. Not only do they display or have *meaning*, they are active in creating the context of that meaning. They have agency in their behavior. Materiality is expressive. The efficacy of objects is in relation to the meaning they express. "Things" have a capacity to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own. *Thingness* is not a fixed stability of materiality or a passive object, rather, she theorizes that materiality is as much a force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension. [1]

Demonstrating the vibrancy and power of materiality, my video sculpture is the collaboration of a charged object with time-based digital video imagery projected into the object. As video is nomadic, transitory, itinerant and even entropic, the juxtaposition of video with sculptural object is an active collaboration of the cultural or social meaning embedded in the object, with the animated imagery. Carried on the light of the digital video, the narrative intervenes in the meaning of the object. The digital theatrics of video sculpture engage objects as actants with a vital impetus – never acting alone. Their efficacy or agency always resonates in a collaboration, or in this case a collision, as objects are actors in this theatre of art installations. [2]

Objects Embedded With Memories

The potency of the material culture (materiality) emanates from memories embedded in and evoked by objects. Objects become sites of memory. Memory is intimately connected to our material culture. In the book "Memory Work: Archeologies of Material Practice" memory work refers to both the social practices that create memories and the materiality of memory making. Personal events and activities leave behind remnants or vestiges of social practices, that become infused with memories. Another example are the highly charged material fragments deposited by ritual and ceremony in indigenous cultures. Memory resides in these material traces, evoking strong emotions long after the performance of the ritual. In archeological research, objects uncovered provide insight into social and cultural practices, as they are traces of deposits left by these material practices. Memories of these practices are embedded in archeological objects which create contexts in which memory is materialized. The same is true for contemporary objects that embody memories of histories or practices. Materiality becomes a portal to understanding the connections between people through time, and diverse geographic locations. [3]

Resonances of memories are evoked in my video/multimedia installations. In the installation titled "Lightening in My Blood" the *object* is a large cardboard playhouse painted white - imbued with childhood memories of spontaneous narratives erupting in make-believe spaces. This *house* is placed on a small pedestal with wheels on the sides –giving the contradictory impression that the house is mobile. One side of the house glows with the fast paced video of baby salmon obsessively jumping at a grille trying to escape, in a fish hatchery in Oregon. This imagery mirrors the underlying emotions of participants in the video on the opposite side of this house – a slow walk through a nursing home captured from a wheel chair. The inaccessible inside of the house remains empty filled with an uncomfortable darkness, except for the fragments of video that push through the small cut-out windows. The sound of

gushing water fills the space. This potency of the material cultural emanates from memories embedded in, and evoked by, objects such as this playhouse. [4] Objects as sites of memory, construct personal emotional landscapes.

Emotions are sited in objects as memories become embedded in them. Artifacts carry the remembrance of events, the history, the power of an event such as trophies, plaques, certificates, as well as baby blankets or stuffed animals from childhood. Emotionality is active in objects through the memories they possess. The installation "Against the Current" employs the highly charged object of a hospital bed with the railings up, occupied by a body tumbling in a stream with a salmon run. (See Figure 1.) Emotionality is palpable as the nude body twists and turns in the water, as salmon swim upstream, against the current. See Figure 2. Salmon create a powerful metaphor as they are born in fresh water, and swim downstream and into the ocean as they mature with the radical shift in their environment from fresh water to salt water. Years later they return to this same stream, swimming upstream against the current to return to the lake of their birth. During this journey their powerful bodies propel them up the falls in the river. The timing of this return is for them to spawn, which jarringly is followed by their death. This installation exemplifies physical things that are employed to signify ephemeral events, virtual experiences or spiritual rituals. [2] They become signifiers for complex concepts. The physicality of emotions embedded in these objects is transformed into ephemeral, virtual or spiritual experiences through on-line societies, virtual relationships or spiritual experiences.

Agency of Objects

They are *animate* and possess agency, as objects are actants with a vital impetus – never acting alone. Objects are *animate* and possess agency, as they are actants with a vital impetus – never acting alone. Artifacts cause actions and their effects have consequences. Their efficacy or agency always depends on collaboration with other objects and people. In indigenous cultures there are numerous ritual and sacred objects that *possess* agency. A provocative object in African culture is the *Power Figure*, imbued with spiritual power by a ritual specialist. They operate with different functions such as healing, divination or protection. These unique sculptures are thought to have their own identities, and are treated with great respect because of the power they possess. Secret compartments within these objects contain special ingredients empowered to carry out their functions. These figures frequently are constructed with mirrors positioned on their stomachs, which become the eyes of the figure, enabling them to “see into the spiritual realm”. Highly charged objects are an integral aspect of indigenous cultures. Emotions reside in these objects and are catalyzed in the interstitial spaces between the objects, shaman, and citizens during ritual performances and ceremonies.

‘Machinic Assemblage’

The object is neither subject or object as in the grammar of a sentence but rather a participant in a *mosaic* or an assemblage which is comprised of heterogeneous elements. Emotions reside in multiple realms, in the interstitial spaces of assemblages of diverse elements. DeLeuze describes this synthesis of heterogeneities, an acculturation of diverse elements, as machinic assemblage. [5] According to Bennett, machinic assemblage becomes a body that is multiple, with objects functioning in assemblage, in a mosaic. Mosaicism links the degree of internal diversity to the degree of power possessed by the thing. The agency of assemblages is the sharing of powers between artifacts, or people and artifacts, and the tendency to operate in dissonant conjunction with each other. Assemblages owe their agentic capacity to the vitality of materials that constitute it. [1]

An exhibition titled *Machinic Alliances* at Danniell Arnaud Contemporary Art Gallery in London in the summer of 2008, examines the issue of 'machinic' as a process that expresses our capacity as humans to form alliances with non-human forces, be they animal, insect, plant or virus. The exhibition takes this Deleuzian premise as the basis from which to propose unholy affiliations between categories of human/animal/technological.

Digital Art and Design

Nonobjectness is the focus of the Design firm named Nonobject Studio created by Branko Lukic with the objective of bringing meaning to otherwise unremarkable objects by creating emotional links to them. Engaging the idea of the agency of objects, they employ the power of emotions to activate and invigorate objects they design. Objects are designed and empowered, based on emotional references embedded in them. [6]

An iPhone app was invented by Alicia Morga to tracking emotions, for the purpose of managing one's emotions. The user inputs their evaluation or interpretation of their own emotional states. The app allows the user to track their emotional responses in order to become more aware of one's feelings and control them. The implication being that one's emotions are transferred to the iPhone.

Art exhibitions are also probing the site of emotions. The exhibition *Talking to Objects*, currently at MOMA in New York City, examines what is necessary to develop machines/objects that communicate their use and process for interaction to the user. The resonance of responses reside in this interstitial space between the user and the object. A previous exhibition at the New Museum in New York was titled *Free* exploring the Internet as a public art space. One artwork in this digital exhibition was a virtual exhibition of objects titled "School of Objects Criticized" by Alexandre Singh in which he located ordinary object positioned on spot-lighted pedestals. He transformed these toys and household items into characters performing a lively comedy of manners.

In my video sculpture, video projection and object collide or collaborate in creating a hybrid with the power and provocation arising out of the assemblage of diverse elements. Dynamic force, power emanates from the spactio-temporal configuration rather than from either participant. There is a combustion of the interstitial forces.

Contemporary theory migrates emotion from the physicality of the body to objects – both in the material world and the digital realm. The assemblage of emotional resonances are highly complex networks entangling people with objects collaborating in virtual and ephemeral experiences across cultures. Examples are "Vigilant things" created as powerful protectors in Yoruba culture. Amazing constructions involving ordinary materials such as string, paper and sticks, are described as "ase-impregnated sculptural constructs". A battered black plastic bag filled with a potent substance, tied and hung from a stick over a pile of recently cut green branches, signifies ownership. Anyone who steals these branches is warned and will "suffer some calamity". There are invisible potencies embedded in these protective constructions called "aale" that protect property and objects. These aale, even though they are constructed with ordinary objects like cloth and branches, *contain* and emit strong emotional resonances. [7]

The Chinese tradition of 'shi' is another example of the emotionality and agency embedded in objects. This concept of "shi" embodies the idea of congregational agency in which an assemblage owes its

agentic capabilities to the vitality of materials that constitute it. The shi of an assemblage is vibratory. The potential of this assemblage originates not in human initiatives but instead results from the very disposition of things. "Shi" is the style, energy, propensity, trajectory or élan inherent in a specific arrangement of things.

The material agency of assemblages is the sharing of powers between artifacts, or people and artifacts, and the tendency to operate in dissonant conjunction with each other. The assemblage owes its agentic capacity to the vitality of materials that constitute it.

Emotions have migrated from the physicality of the body, facial expressions, gestures, and posturing to the evocative resonances embedded in objects, and in the interstitial spaces between the body and objects. The digital realm has transformed the experience of affect into virtual and ephemeral territory, reawakening the emotional power of invisible potencies of objects in diverse cultures.

References and Notes:

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4. *Joan Truckenbrod, "Video Sculpture Lecture", (paper presented at the International Sculpture Conference, London, April 7-9, 2010).*
5. *Lawrence Grossberg, "Affect's Future: Rediscovering the Virtual in the Actural," in The Affect Theory Reader, eds. Melissan & Gregory Seigworth, 309-338 (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).*
6. *Branko Lukic, Barry M. Katz and Bill Moggridge, Nonobject (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).*
7. *David T. Doris, Vigilant Things, On Theives, Yoruba Anti-Aesthetics, and the Strange Fate of Ordinary Objects (Seattle-London: University of Washington Press, 2011).*