

PROGRAM

Matter, Memory, and the More-than-Human

Relational Aesthetics and Politics in the Age of the Anthropocene

Symposium: 16:00-19:00, Room 5.K12 (Nov. 27, 2014)

Workshop: 10:00-12:00, Room 5.K03 (Nov. 28, 2014)

In times of renewed debates on the status of the object and the real in the arts the question of a new radical empiricism is at stake. How is experience not human but always more-than-human or ecological? We ask: how such an ecological approach is political and what are its aesthetics?

Current enthusiasm about new forms of realism, like speculative realism, strikes the art field with immense force. What we perceive is a certain return of the "object," similar to architecture's return to the sketch-board, after three decades of conceptually driven discourse and its potential pitfalls. Finally, some might argue, we overcome the predominance of discourse and encounter "things" beyond language. What seems crucial, is the status of the real in these new aesthetic and philosophical debates. With this symposium we want to extend the rather dialectic procedure with which this debate continues and investigate how the relations between matter, memory and the more-than-human enable a multi-shaded formation of the real, inclusive of the materialist sensibilities of Marxist, post-structuralist and radical empiricist philosophies of the last century. Making such an inquiry an aesthetic concern motivates us to reconsider the status of the empirical in relation to the experiential. Rather than following phenomenological traditions the symposium puts particular attention to early pragmatist philosophies like William James, Alfred North Whitehead, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, providing a different, radical empiricist, version of the real. Finally the question would be, how such a take on realism in the age of the anthropocene affords us to re-assess what a more-than-human politics might look like and what forms of organization are in need for its realization.

Link: <http://www.zhdk.ch/?agenda/detail&vid=22535>

Where: Zurich University of the Arts, Toni-Areal, Pfingstweidstrasse 96, 8005 Zurich



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Zürcher Hochschule der Künste
Institut für Gegenwartskunst

SCHEDULE

27.11.2014 (Room 5.K12)

16:00

Welcome and Short Introduction (Christoph Brunner)

16:15-16:45

Heather Davis (Penn State University)

"Ancient Archives of the Future: Strange Temporalities of Plastic"

16:45-17:15

Ridvan Askin (University of Basel)

"'Every pumpkin in the field, goes through every point of pumpkin history': Emerson and the Memory of Matter"

17:15-17:30

Discussion

17:30-18:00

Stamatia Portanova (University of Naples L'Orientale)

"The Genius and the Algorithm. Reflections on the Postdigital Aesthetics as Capitalist Neurosis"

18:00-18:30

Joel McKim (Birkbeck, University of London)

"Object, Matter, Energy: Towards a Philosophy of Infrastructure"

18:30-18:45

Discussion

18:45-19:00

Break

Special Lecture organized by Vertiefung Fotografie

19:00

Sadie Plant

"Something and Nothing - a few thoughts on philosophy's latest twists and turns"

28.11.2014

10:00-12:00 (Room 5.K03)

Workshop with all participants

ABSTRACTS & BIOGRAPHIES

Heather Davis (Penn State University) - hmd17@psu.edu

"Ancient Archives of the Future: Strange Temporalities of Plastic"

Plastic is being considered as one of the markers of the Anthropocene. That is, it is one of the compounds, including radionuclides that appeared after the explosion of the first atomic bomb, polyaromatic hydrocarbons from fossil fuels, and lead contamination, that has irrevocably altered the geologic make-up of the earth. This materialized stratum of industrial capitalism can be considered a kind of archive for the future, one that is composed of the deep past. This paper will consider the ways that geologic memory is folded into matter, and how, under the auspices of chemical engineering, we now face a time of deadly durations. For, as Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent writes, "While the manufacture of plastics destroys the archives of life on the earth, its waste will constitute the archives of the twentieth century and beyond." Extending historicity well into the deep future, I am concerned with the ways in which the concepts of materialized memory manifest in the chain of polymers that we call plastic. What time scales does plastic introduce, what processes of slowing down or recalcitrance are found in the midst of intense and rapid change?

Synthetic polymers may be the strongest bonds that human invention has produced, but they will not last forever. Try as we might through chemical engineering to escape the bonds of the earth, we are inextricably part of its endless processes of mutation and evolution. Taking a perspective of both time and biological diversity that is not connected directly with the human shows our projections of mastery as quite impactful, but ultimately as merely one event amongst numerous others in the geologic time of the earth. The question, then, is how to gracefully respond to compounding injustices within these tumultuous, strange times.

Heather Davis is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute for the Arts and Humanities at Pennsylvania State University. Her current work traces the ethology of plastic and its links to petrocapiatalism. She is the editor of *Art in the Anthropocene: Aesthetics, Politics, Environment, Epistemology* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, forthcoming 2015). Her writing can be found at heathermdavis.com.

Ridvan Askin (University of Basel) - ridvan.askin@unibas.ch

"'Every pumpkin in the field, goes through every point of pumpkin history': Emerson and the Memory of Matter"

Emerson time and again stresses the occult relation between the human and the non-human. The name of this occult relation is spirit. The relation is only occult for us, though. For matter, there is nothing secret and hidden to be disclosed in this relation. It simply inhabits it. Matter stands forth in it, matter stands forth in spirit. And it is this standing forth which in turn serves as a *reminder* to us that this relation, that spirit, is indeed the case. In this sense, pumpkins are natural archives *for us*, and the memory

of matter is a material function *for us humans*.

What entices us to see matter as more than matter is its beauty. Emerson captures this correlation of matter, memory, and aesthetics in the inconspicuous expression, “[t]he earth is a museum.” The museum in its double function as memorial and as the temple of the muses denotes the fusion of memory and aesthetics. And matter—the earth—is the aesthetico-memorial site in question. In short, out aesthetic sensibility, via matter, is apt to unveil the realm of spirit. The material manifestation of such disclosure is the work of art. Art thus becomes the primary means of metaphysical enquiry. Since tracing the genuinely metaphysical relation between matter, memory, and aesthetics directly leads into the Emersonian imperative to attune oneself to spirit, the paper will end with brief considerations of his ethics and politics. Within the established framework, art qua primary discloser of spirit cannot be directly political. But, by prying open the realm of spirit, it becomes the facilitator of any politics worthy its name.

Ridvan Askin is Senior Assistant in American and General Literatures at the University of Basel. He completed his PhD in early 2014 with a thesis on “Narrative and Becoming: Differential Narratology” and most recently co-edited a special issue on “Aesthetics in the 21st Century” of *Speculations: A Journal of Speculative Realism*. His main research interests are aesthetics, contemporary North-American fiction, and the relation of philosophy and literature.

Stamatia Portanova (University of Naples L’Orientale) stamatia.portanova@gmail.com
"The Genius and the Algorithm. Reflections on the Postdigital Aesthetics as Capitalist Neurosis"

My paper investigates the relationship between Postdigital Aesthetics and the perceptual conditions generated by post-industrial capitalism in the age of the Anthropocene. Adopting Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* and Whitehead's *Concept of Nature* as radically empirical and constructivist references, I analyze the shift from modern capitalist schizophrenia to contemporary postindustrial neurosis. This shift can be defined as a different reconstruction of the real: from a flow of images to a flow of pixels. The proliferation of pixillated fragments through the ubiquitous presence of computer screens can also be explored as the symptom of a new ontopathology where the abstract materiality of data and information overtakes the energy of affects and experiences. The paper concludes with the proposition of a different schizophrenia of digital vision, in which the sensation of the landscape (the genius) offers an alternative to its algorithmic mapping.

Stamatia Portanova is a Part-Time Lecturer in Cultural and Media Studies at the Università degli Studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale' (Naples), where she is also a member of the Centre for Postcolonial and Gender Studies. Her research focuses on philosophy, digital culture and aesthetics. She is the author of *Moving without a Body. Digital Philosophy and Choreographic Thoughts* (MIT Press, 'Technologies of Lived

Abstraction series), and of several articles published in books and journals such as *Body and Society*, *Computational Culture*, *Space and Culture*, *Angelaki*, *Inflexions* and *Fibreculture*. She is a member of the SenseLab, a Montréal-based interdisciplinary laboratory on research-creation focusing on intersections between philosophy, technology and art through the sensing body in motion.

Joel McKim (Birkbeck, University of London) - j.mckim@bbk.ac.uk
“Object, Matter, Energy: Towards a Philosophy of Infrastructure”

Questions of infrastructure have assumed a prominent place in the practice and discourse of both contemporary art and architecture. This recent infrastructural turn – marked by an interest in the organization of complex systems of energy, transportation and ecology – has often been accompanied by a concerted turn away from engagements with philosophy. Infrastructure-oriented architecture, for example, attempts to prioritize the instrumental and pragmatic dimensions of design over and above any abstract forms of theorization. Yet this rejection of philosophy is a curious one given the recent proliferation of philosophical writing that seeks to address quite specifically questions of realism, materiality and natural forces that would seemingly pertain directly to issues of infrastructure. Whether grouped under the heading ‘speculative realism’ or ‘new materialism,’ these varied currents of thought are linked by a shared interest in moving away from textual or cultural analysis in order to conceptualize the realm of non-human objects, systems and processes.

This paper will consider whether, in light of these recent discussions, something resembling a philosophy of infrastructure might be possible, one that would be capable of productively engaging with current practices of art and architecture. With this goal in mind, the paper will outline a small portion of this speculative and materialist conversation, focusing primarily on the vital materialism of Jane Bennett and the object-oriented philosophy of Graham Harman and Timothy Morton. The ethical, aesthetic and political insights brought forward by these three thinkers will be applied to two examples of infrastructural infrastructure that are among my particular research interests: Lifescape, the large-scale landscape urbanism project that is transforming New York’s Fresh Kills landfill into a public park and wetlands conservation area; and the global network of (largely) invisible data centres, the material infrastructure that houses our ever-accumulating stockpile of digital information.

Joel McKim is Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies in the Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. His research is concerned with issues of political communication in the built environment, digital culture and the intersection of media and architecture. His recent writing on these topics has appeared in such journals as *Theory, Culture & Society*, *Space & Culture*, *PUBLIC* and *borderlands* and in the edited collections *DIY Citizenship: Critical Making and Social Media* (MIT Press) and *The Missed Encounter of Radical Philosophy with Architecture* (Bloomsbury). He is currently completing a book titled *Memory Complex: Architecture, Media and Politics in a Post-9/11 New York*.