Material Traces: Performativity, Artistic "Work," and New Concepts of Agency

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The setting is a boxing gym in Montreal, borrowed and transformed for the 2013 Edgy Women Festival.[1] The work I am there to experience, *Becoming an Image*, is by Los Angeles–based artist Heather Cassils. I am led, with other participants, into a completely dark room. Something looms in the center, which we can see peripherally beyond the tiny cones of light thrown off by the assistants' flashlights as they put us in place along the walls of the small room set up inside the larger space of the gym. The assistants turn off their lights and we are left waiting. A visceral sense of claustrophobia, the rustling and heat of other bodies, the loamy smell of damp earth (that hulking form I saw looming in the center of the room when we entered must be a lump of clay)...the darkness closes in. We hear someone enter the room. We hear a body flailing and beating the form in the middle of the room, laboring to change the shape of the clay; the body's efforts are punctuated by the sharp hiss of an aspirated exhale at every punch.

I am in the front row and standing so close to the laboring body I can feel drops of sweat fling through the air and hear grunts and huffing and puffing as the boxer/artist relentlessly

1. This project was generously supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and would not have "materialized" without this support.

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Figure 2. Heather Cassils, After*, 2,000-pound clay bash, remnant sculpture from the performance* Becoming an Image*, Edgy Women Festival, Montreal, 2013. (Artworks © Heather Cassils; photo by Cassils and Alejandro Santiago; courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Art)*

pummels the clay. Suddenly a photographer's flash illuminates the scene and we see the sweaty body and the human-sized lump of clay.[2] This goes on for a good 20 minutes and we can sense the fatigue that is setting in for the "boxer" as time goes by—the strenuous breathing, the splashes of sweat that land on those of us in the front row, the laboring body in brief flash images, which we apprehend only a split second later as afterimages burned into our retinas. We identify with the laboring body, experiencing the fatigue in our own bodies as well: the standing, the listening, the projective co-embodiment are exhausting.

Later in New York, via remnants and photographs from different performances of *Becoming an Image*, the piece is displayed.[3] Impressed with the efforts of the sweating boxer, the huge

2. In actuality the photographer uses a very bright light to illuminate the scene *before* setting off the flash, but perceptually the two flashes are indistinguishable. The photographer for the Montreal version was Alejandro Santiago.

3. Here, I am riffing on the installation of *Becoming an Image* in *Body of Work*, a Cassils show at Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York, 2013. My experience of the clay, however, took place in relation to the Montreal version of the performance as described here; my experience of the later New York installation is via a projection of this Montreal experience, and via installation photographs and sound clips. I am grateful to the artist for supplying these.

Figure 1. (facing page) Heather Cassils, Becoming an Image *performance still, Edgy Women Festival, Montreal, 2013. Amelia Jones is to the right (hands on knees). (Artworks © Heather Cassils; photo by Cassils and Alejandro Santiago; courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Art)*

Amelia Jones is the Robert A. Day Professor in Art and Design and Vice Dean of Critical Studies at the Roski School of Art and Design at University of Southern California. A curator and a theorist and historian of art and performance, her recent publications include* Perform Repeat Record: Live Art in History *(University of Chicago Press, 2012), coedited with Adrian Heathfield;* Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts *(Routledge, 2012); the edited volume* Sexuality *(Whitechapel, 2014); and, coedited with Erin Silver,* Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories *(Manchester University Press, forthcoming). Her exhibition* Material Traces: Time and the Gesture in Contemporary Art *took place in 2013 in Montreal. ameliaj@usc.edu

lump of manipulated clay stands as a record of the past action, marked by the material traces of artistic labor. The clay is accompanied by a soundtrack (taped during one performance of the piece, the sound has been dramatized, edited for effect). The pictures—taken by the photographer whose flashes gave us glimpses of the action—are glossy, beautiful, gleaming windows onto the past action. These elements all together are evocative in a phenomenological sense of what I want to call the feeling of their "having been made," affecting my physicality, my sense of scale and (through identification) my desire to act or react in return. I have a particularly visceral relationship to this hunk of clay-flesh. Surely it smells of sweat? It has the texture of skin. It is a body to me. It reanimates Cassils's actions.

This project by Cassils epitomizes a new mode of hybrid practices that draws on a legacy of body, conceptual, and installation art to render new complex art experiences that are performative yet exist in various material forms (including, arguably, that of the artist's laboring body). Such works show the limits of old methods of interpretation, whether art historical or curatorial (generally speaking, invested in final "products" as made by intentional agents called artists) or based in performance studies' tendency to emphasize process and narrative content or to claim "authenticity" for the performing live body. While curatorial practice and art history would dwell on the photographs alone, designating Cassils as their intentional, activating agent and reading them as static objects, performance studies would tend to discuss the visceral experience of the performative moment of enactment, dwelling on this experience as proof of our access to an "authentic" body of action. It is worth looking more closely at such hybrid work precisely because it complicates both of these tendencies. (Although I could be accused of caricaturing the two disciplines here, my sketches of the basic tenets nonetheless still inform in at least indirect ways most interpretation in these disciplinary discourses.)[4] Both of these tendencies are inadequate to the kind of art that interests me here—art that is not lodged in or as only a final object, but that, in its performativity, also involves materialities clearly manipulated and foregrounded, with the processes of artistic making indicated or marked through these materialities.

In this immediate case, Cassils's performance itself was in obvious ways performative: as in J.L. Austin's original formulation, the action *did* (an act of making) rather than *described* (expressed the artist's feelings or represented something in the world) (Austin [1961] 1989). I did in fact attend the version Cassils produced in Montreal, and thus my own body inhabits the experience I describe of her embodied action. But what interests me is not this type of description or the action itself but the performativity of the remains of the action (in particular the lump of clay) and the way in which the project as a whole interrogates the interrelation between action and materiality. What interests me is, for example, the materiality of the clay in relation to the bodies in question: the way in which, whether or not I experienced the performance itself, the clay produces phenomenological effects relating to the previous creative action of an artist's laboring body. The clay presents itself as having been made, having been formed by an intense artistic labor; as I engage it, it enacts and enlivens my own sense of embodiment. These materialities affect my sense of being in space (as do Minimalist sculptures) but also, through the signs of their having been made, speak a body having been in motion—in this case, violently so.[5]

4. In fact, as curator of the 2013 exhibition *Material Traces: Time and the Gesture in Contemporary Art*, I chose to install solely Cassils's photographs, from an earlier version of the performance (in Los Angeles), to evoke the action of the event; the exhibition took place at the Leonard and Ellen Bina Art Gallery at Concordia University in Montreal; Cassils's performance of the piece again at Edgy Women coincidentally occurred during the run of my show. This article is an attempt to go further and explore the complexities of how such a project works over time. For an elaboration of the tendencies in art history and performance studies see Jones (2008).

5. I am certain this effect would occur for most people experiencing the clay in its exhibition context, whether or not they witnessed the performance. Having witnessed the performance, however, my relation to the clay's having been made as a material trace of artistic production is dramatized.

I'm "in" the clay and it's "in" me. We reciprocally define each other, both of us relating back to "Cassils" as a previous materiality, a previous embodiment, as well as an agential force of making. This project typifies a new approach in contemporary art that merges aspects of performance with aspects of the visual arts, with the latter's habitual reliance on "materiality." Cassils's *Becoming an Image* (even the title speaks of this) exemplifies and explores a new mode of contemporary art that cannot be fully understood solely through formalism or structural analyses (its hybrid and performative nature makes such analyses less than useful as there is no single final product to be examined) nor through performance theory's emphasis on ephemeral action (the materiality of the work *is* its key site of activity and its transformation is key to the experience).

Figure 3. Heather Cassils, After*, 2,000-pound clay bash, remnant sculpture from the performance* Becoming an Image *performance surrounded by four channel audio installation Ghost, as installed in Cassils's* Body of Work *show, Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York, 7 September–12 October 2013. (Artworks © Heather Cassils; photo by Varvara Mikushkina; courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Art)*

Such hybrid practices thus beg for new hybrid modes of analysis. I would like to offer one here—one that incorporates aspects of art history (attention to form and materiality), performance theory (a sensitivity towards how activities over time accrue significance in relation to receivers) and Marxian theories of labor, but also calls for new models of analysis—such as new materialism and thing theory—that allow for a focus on how *action* intersects with *materials* to produce new spaces of meaning.

The Allure and Limits of Theorizing Artistic Labor

Entering the gallery, I encounter a stack of two-by-fours, each piece of wood stamped ostentatiously on one end with the word "STUD" (in fact, the label is from Home Depot and is the industry standard for labeling wood to be used in building construction as studs). This is Paul Donald's *Untitled (Studs)* (2013). The stack is, however, uneven and its precarious skittering off to one side makes me uneasy. Having seen the piece being made, it is no mystery that I tend to focus in on the manipulated nature of the wood—each of the sticks of wood has a "head" whittled laboriously into a strange, organic knob. A giant could pick one up in her hand, holding the whittled end, and use the board as a phallic weapon. Bodily functions are thus suggested both in the handle-like references and the content or symbolism of the carved shapes (which look like tool handles, scrota, penises, or lasciviously pointing fingers) but also in the signs of their having been made—the whittled ends, which speak at this later time of the chips and slices made by Donald's laboring body in the past.

It is not difficult for me to imagine this body (he lives with me and his studio is downstairs) leaning over the long piece of wood, holding it awkwardly while reshaping the end into an echo of the body's own appendages or prostheses (the very bodily tools with which the carving is

Figure 4. Paul Donald, Untitled (Studs)*, 2013; pine 2 x 4's ("studs"). Final work as installed in* Material Traces: Time and the Gesture in Contemporary Art*, Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, Montreal. (Photo by Paul Litherland; courtesy Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery)*

done).[6] The wood is animate in multiple senses. It moves me. In encountering it I realize it is precisely the labor, the effects of which imprint the organic forms at the end of each piece of wood, and the nature of the claims attached to it (a body of someone called an "artist") that has transformed a formerly living material (wood, from a tree) into something animate again, but alive through action, action that in turn required thought and ultimately congealed in material form. The artwork issues from but also calls forth the interaction of wood and humans, maker and interpreter (viewer or, what we might better call "experiencer," to evoke all levels of interpretive engagement) and tools, not to mention the sites of the making and the display of art. With its clear signs of having been made, Donald's piece seems explicitly to enact Jane Bennett's new materialist emphasis on "doing and [...] effecting by a human-nonhuman assemblage" (2010:28). Donald and his tools and his wood epitomize the human-nonhuman assemblage that Bennett so incisively explores as the crux of her new materialist theory of "vibrant matter."

How do we understand the relationship between such hybrid performative-material assemblages and the laboring body (of the artist, but also of the interpreter)? In his 1867 opus *Capital* Karl Marx noted of "man's activity" that, assisted by "instruments of labor [it] effects an alteration [...] in the material worked upon" such that the "process disappears in the product" ([1867] 1961:180). I cite Marx strategically. Through this gesture I want to do two things: first, I aim to distance my arguments from a Marxist or neo-Marxist emphasis on the ways in which capitalism effaces signs of "process," emphasizing rather art practices that exaggerate the signs of the work's production; second, I intend to stress the interrelations among processes of labor or *making* and the materialities (including humans) transformed through these processes—a conjunction Marx's theory nonetheless opens up.

Starting my theory with Marx, while moving in a different direction from Marxist or neo-Marxist analyses relating labor primarily or solely to the circulation of capital and the erasure of signs of production, provides a thought space that allows me to examine how this kind of hybrid practice functions for those who engage the materialities once the literal action is over and, crucially, to explore how the traces of artistic making can be inscribed in the materialities, engaging later audiences through a particular kind of performativity. In turn, through a focus on materialities that goes beyond theories of artistic labor—specifically through new materialism and thing theory, combined with phenomenology's tools—this exploration connects the making of objects with the processual nature of performance. Rather than assuming that making

6. Paul Donald is my life partner and I watched him at various points make parts of this work. He has also orchestrated performance works in which he labors publicly to build structures in gallery spaces, explicitly addressing artistic labor; see *Would Work* (2011) and *Causeway* (2013). In the case of *Untitled (Studs)*, the works were made in dialogue with me for my show *Material Traces.* My decision to include his work in that show and again here has to do with the fact that these projects developed out of watching Donald produce art out of the materialities of his body and wood and being in dialogue with him about his relationship as a making subject with his tools and materials.

art involves process while subsuming the process into a final object through interpretations that focus only on the object as static and immutable (as art criticism, curating, and art history tend to do), I engage with objects as themselves in process and more importantly as *indicating previous processes of making* or what I call the *having been made* of the work of art.

I am interested in hybrid works such as these by Cassils and Donald that continue to have significance and to produce effects and affects after the moment of their initial manipulation (or more accurately, the infinite moments of their manipulation, since things take *time* to produce and exist through *time*). I argue that they do this precisely by insistently rendering or *materializing* rather than—per Marx on the labor of producing the commodity—effacing the signs of their having been made. While Marxist and neo-Marxist arguments have proved extremely useful in generating debates about the relationships among the artist, the art, and the marketplaces for art, I do not focus in this article on this point (although I have elsewhere; see Jones 2006). I argue instead that art can *work* or perform itself through another angle—that of materialities (including those of the laboring bodies of making and engaging with art's stuff). The limits of Marxist or neo-Marxist theories of labor are clear in relation to art: they do not interrogate how the materialities of art *themselves work*. New materialist theory provides a key method to examine how the complex of materialities in the art "works" to produce endlessly shifting meanings and values. In particular I make

Figure 5. Paul Donald, Untitled (Studs)*, work in progress showing carving of pine 2 x 4 ("stud"). Shown in workshop, 2013. (Photo courtesy of Paul Donald)*

Figure 6. Paul Donald, Untitled (Studs)*, work in progress showing view of workshop, 2013. (Photo courtesy of Paul Donald)*

use here of philosopher and physicist Karen Barad's new materialist theory, closely related to the "thing theory" or "Actor-Network-Theory" of new materialist philosopher Bruno Latour and others, extending my thought experiment and moving me towards an understanding of the kind of hybrid art practice that insistently returns to overtly inscribed and performatively manipulated materialities.

The Allure and Limits of New Materialist Theory

Juliana Cerquiera Leite's large twisting silicone, rubber, fiberglass, and plastic sculptural form, *the climb is also the fall* (2011), offers dramatic surfaces, hollows, and expanses apparently molded through direct bodily imprint. On first encounter, even if we know nothing of its construction, the large spiral of rubbery silicone seems to have been shaped by the voids produced by her body rotating downward or tumbling, as if carving space like a dancer, but one in controlled free fall (a contradiction that seems possible through this materiality).

This spill of skin-like swathes of silicone (marked with hand-, foot-, and skin-prints all the way along) is dynamic in space, hung downward from a point in the ceiling and yet appearing to press upward from the ground in a muscular movement. We are literally *impressed* in turn by these marks of having been made, evocative of creative effort. A monumental silicone object, as dynamic as a moving body guided by the spatially active forms of a spiral staircase, presents (or does it *re*-present?) Leite's body, which had to have been "there," moving in space, for this corporeally molded form to have been constructed and then exhibited for us "here" as a material trace. I wrap my mind around its construction (how it had to have been made) in order to inhabit the folds through sympathetic projection. My body writhes in my mind's eye—I can't quite go there. The downward trajectory is too precipitous, the upward reach too high. It's the anxiety caused by this impossible twist that makes the piece *work* on and for me.

Figure 7. Juliana Cerqueira Leite, the climb is also the fall*, 2011; silicone rubber, fiberglass, plastic, metal. As installed in* Material Traces: Time and the Gesture in Contemporary Art*, Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, Montreal. (Photo by Paul Litherland; courtesy Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery)*

Leite's hybrid practice—both a performance document and a work of art (a thing in space)—performs labor and activates materialities (including the artist's and spectators' bodies). Fully experienced, such practices demand complex methods of engagement

that acknowledge the tension between activation and materiality. Barad's key point (like that of other key Deleuzian new materialists such as Rosi Braidotti) is that all materialities have "agential" force, and thus that human agency is deprivileged as the source of all meaningful expression or action in the world. Barad stresses what she calls a "relational ontology" where materialities (including human bodies/subjects) affect one another in a continual way.[7] As suggested, these ideas seem particularly well suited to rethinking how hybrid art *works*, and in particular to doing this by creating, in turn, hybrid methods across performance theory and art theory, methods that are themselves performative.

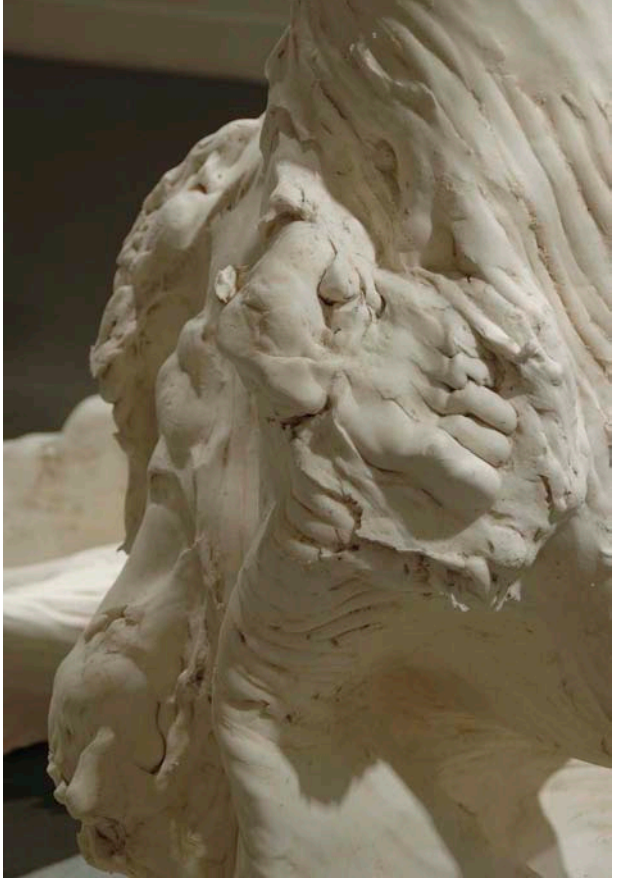

Figure 8. Juliana Cerqueira Leite, the climb is also the fall*, 2011, detail. (Photo courtesy of Juliana Cerquiera Leite)*

My thought experiment, then, is reliant on a method of activating what Barad theorizes as "agential cuts" into the interrelational flow of meaning between me and the stuff called art, interpretations as interventions that expose the materialities at play in the relationship between us. In contrast to the Cartesian cut, which substantiates the thinking human subject in opposition to the putatively inert objects in the world, the agential cut "enacts a *local* resolution *within* the phenomenon of the inherent ontological indeterminacy" between humans and other materialities—it allows for an interpretation that is provisional and interrelated with its object rather than fixing it in any final way (Barad 2003:815).[8] The point is that I am not by any means fully in control of this cut as intentional subject (which, arguably, Cartesianism promises). Rather, I am largely guided by the materialities I engage, from Cassils's lump of clay and laboring body to the vicissitudes of my computer keyboard as it facilitates my

7. See Barad (2003:812) and Barad's 2009 interview with Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (2012). Barad's theory is an "onto-epistemology" or, as performance theorist Tawny Andersen argues, "it is both an ontology and an epistemology, since Barad argues that what 'is' cannot be separated from how we perceive what 'is'"; see Andersen (2014).

8. See also Kelly Oliver (1999). Here, Oliver rejects what she argues to be the lingering binarism of Judith Butler's hugely influential theory of performativity, and calls for revivifying the self-other relation by stressing that interpretation itself is implicated in the determination of meaning (of self, of other, and surely of visual or performance art), which occurs not only through antagonism and opposition but through a potentially desiring and even *creative* rather than dangerous or threatening interrelatedness. Just as Barad agues for the interrelationality of materiality itself (including humans), so Oliver argues for "a truly interrelational conception of subjectivity [wherein...] dependence is seen as the force of life, as the very possibility of change." The self, in this model, is "fundamentally dialogic and relational rather than sovereign," and interpretation thus becomes the most viable site for resignifying and thus for an ethics to be articulated (see 1999:159, 144). The key difference in the two models (Barad's and Oliver's) is that the latter is still human-centered; it will be clear that I draw from both.

Figure 9. Juliana Cerqueira Leite, the climb is also the fall*, 2011. As installed in* Material Traces: Time and the Gesture in Contemporary Art*, with Amelia Jones engaging and explaining. (Photo courtesy of the artist and Christopher Braddock)*

access to the theories and words I mobilize to try to describe previous experiences of materialities in relation to art-working processes. I could say, in fact, that the clay called forth my engagement with it, enabling me to "cut" through ideologies of artistic agency by attaching my words to its animating capacities. In Barad's terms, I am part of a system of "intra-actions," hoping to instill a "local causal structure" of constructed cause and effect (815). I write *as if* the works "caused" my reactions and, in turn, *as if* my words can then affect you, my reader, and thus in some way play a role in how you interpret the world; but of course I am also "causing" the materialities of the works to congeal as such just as you, in the future, may engage with my text and then produce new reactions and interpretive materialities I cannot foresee.

What visual art practices, discourses, and institutions offer new materialist or thing theory (not to mention neo-Marxist theory and performance theory), in turn, is a whole series of beliefs that complicate these theories in dramatic ways. First, all visual arts institutions and discourses make some kind of connection between the maker (as intentional origin) and the stuff of art, which is interpreted directly or indirectly as resulting from aspects of the artist's embodiment, motivations, and/or conceptual drives. Visual art (from curatorial practices, art historical writing, and art criticism to aesthetic theory) offers an extreme case in which materiality is fetishized psychically as well as economically (the object, which can accrue astronomical commodity and cultural, political, or "aesthetic" value as based on the structures of desire Freud described so well [see Freud (1927) 1963]), a fetishization coexisting with an extreme humanist investment in singular agency. For example, in *Art and Agency*, Alfred Gell specifically claims that art objects are "indexes of agency," and this agency is paradigmatically and solely *human* (1998: see esp. 14–15). In strong contrast to the arguments of new materialist theorists such as Barad and Latour, and typical of mainstream beliefs about art, Gell describes the artwork as simply a trace of *human* agency with no agential force of its own. Gell's arguments simply crystallize the general tendency in art discourses and institutions to reify artistic agency as fully intentional and determinable through reasoned interpretive methods. Even with time-based works such as live performances, the visual arts world, relying on these structures of belief and value, tends to turn the living body into an object.[9]

9. The 2010 Marina Abramović retrospective *The Artist is Present,* the centerpiece of which was Abramović sitting throughout the opening hours of the museum in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art, exemplifies this tendency (see Jones 2011).

Figure 10. Juliana Cerqueira Leite, the climb is also the fall*, 2011; silicone rubber, fiberglass, plastic, metal, 2011. As installed at A.I.R. Gallery, Brooklyn, New York. (Photo by Amelia Jones)*

Given the entrenched nature of these beliefs about art—as essentially confirming our capacity both to enact our intention in a full and unmediated way and to transcend our brute embodiment, our labor, by making art—I suggest that our goal should be to adopt methods that allow us to engage with the materialities we encounter. By doing so, we assist in the art's ongoing meaning making, that is, its potential to connect us to past materialities, and thus to past agential forces, whether fully human or not.[10] We can only hope to exacerbate potential tensions and gaps and openings, and to foster potential shifts, transformations, pauses, and awarenesses (no matter how small) in the making-interpretation nexus and thus in social relations. Turning away from Gell's romantic and instrumentalizing views of artistic agency, I must not interpret these effects as caused by the artist or the artwork as static entities or origins. These effects are not, as Latour would argue in his Actor-Network-Theory (or ANT), "caused" by intentional agents called "artists," nor in fact could they be said to arise fully from the agency of "critics," "curators," or "art historians." Rather, objects and humans are interrelated, as Latour notes: "To be accounted for, objects [such as, I would insist, artworks] have to enter into accounts. If no trace is produced, they offer no information to the observer and will have no visible effect on other agents." Objects are not mediators but "intermediaries," and must be activated through "specific tricks [...] to *make them talk*" (2005:79). Or, as Bill Brown puts it in his 2001 article "Thing Theory": "The story of objects asserting themselves as things [...] is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation" (2001:4).[11]

10. I would argue against allowing the notion of agency to apply equally to nonhuman and human materialities. Nonetheless the new materialist argument opens up the question of forces of production and meaning in very useful ways, not the least in its emphasis on—per Barad's argument quoted earlier—"human-nonhuman assemblage(s)."

11. Notably, Brown maintains the idea of "human subject," while Latour and Barad do not; this points to the way in which, when art comes into the picture, the "subject" usually returns.

Clearly new materialism offers a very interesting way of thinking about the materialities of the art situation, allowing us strategically to rework how we approach the stuff (worked by humans) that we call "art." In Arjun Appadurai's 1986 book *The Social Life of Things*, influential to the development of thing theory and new materialism, he offers methodological advice that I hope I am following well here: To "illuminate the concrete, historical circulation of things [...] we have to follow the things themselves [...F]rom a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context" (1986:5). I want (per Appadurai) to suggest a method of interpretation through which we follow the "motion" of certain kinds of artworks in order to describe the animating potential of certain kinds of art-making across time. At the same time I reject his focus on the "things themselves," which in fact belies the relationality through which they manifest and come to mean. In art discourse, the claim to let the "things themselves" convey their meaning directly to the interpreter is a classic canard of modernist criticism. The claim functions as a way of disavowing the participation of the critic in determining meaning and value so he or she can claim his or her interpretations as simply "true" because they are presumably conveyed by the object without mediation.

Through some of the key insights of new materialist theory, we can attend to the animated and animating potential of materialities while also acknowledging the performative aspect of these materialities (i.e., that through their specific manifestations, they promote an understanding of the previous actions involved in their having been made in the past). As I have noted, Barad's 2003 theory of "posthumanist performativity" is itself an animating discursive materiality I draw on to make these arguments. Barad's idea of intra-actions between humans and/as things, apparatuses, and the world, and her idea of the performative and "agential" quality of these intra-actions is extremely useful in teasing out how certain artistic practices function to animate future viewers or, more accurately (because the engagement is multisensorial), *experiencers* across time. By intra-action Barad indicates animating movement that at one and the same time affects inside and outside of the matter activated (*inter*-action implies, rather, two discrete and defined entities in relation; *intra*-action describes a much more profound "relational ontology," as she puts it [2003:812]).

Transferring these new materialist terms to the field of art, whether we are discussing conventional, conceptual, or performance artworks, the discursive materialities in question might include elements among the following: the artist, the object, the means through which the idea or concept is communicated (including, with performance or body art, the artist's body), the sites of display, as well as the potential "others" (experiencers) engaging the stuff that has been transformed through labor. This is labor that is defined in a tautological recursive loop as "artistic" because the person doing it positions him/herself as an artist. At the very least, my model of focusing on the materialities of the work by engaging them as potential signs of its having been made affords the possibility of tracing rather than disavowing or ignoring these loops through which we return (conceptually, psychically, or literally—through the study of artists' detritus in archives) to the materialities of the work's production. It encourages the acknowledgment that, without such self-reflexivity, such circuits put into play contradictions that render much art discourse disingenuous at best and self-serving at worst, in that it says everything about the interpreter while claiming to say everything about the work she or he is describing and evaluating.

In engaging Juliana Cerquiera Leite's *the climb is also the fall*, I experience through its materialities the way in which the silicone, the steps, and gravity conspired to limit and define the movements of Leite in composing the imprinted body-work I encounter. Isn't this co-articulation similar to the way in which my description of this experience here affects my memory of the work, and your access to it, and thus what the work "is" for those who have read these words? All are intra-active.

New Materialisms, Hidden Humanisms, and Performance Theory

This hybrid interpretive model can address in this way the interrelations among thought, action, and materiality for the artist as well as subsequent experiencers. Such interrelations not only draw out the interpreter's awareness of previous physical actions in relation to materialities; they call forth our sensitivity to the artist's previous thought processes as connected to choices that resulted in actions affecting materialities, the signs of which are visible to us in the present as we view the work. For example, Mark Igloliorte's *Observational Diptychs* (2010), a group of eight pairs of matched images painted with gestural swaths of paint on thin paper torn from phone books, provoke an acute awareness of the contingency and durationality of artistic perception and later viewer perception (as well as the fragility of matter, which deteriorates over time): each of the paired images shows a slightly different perceptual version of the same mundane object (a shoe, a trash can, a rumpled piece of paper, etc.).[12] As duos, each points to the other as having been made at a slightly different moment in time. Encountering the two images in each pair, one a slightly distorted visual echo of the other, I find my mind shifting back and forth, recreating a perceptual moment (and movement, of Igloliorte's body, shifting in space to view different sides of mundane objects) having been completed in the past. This awareness is called forth not only by the marks as they pucker the thin paper; it is evoked as well by the orientation of the things painted, slightly differently in each image according to where in space Igloliorte positioned himself in relation to the objects.

Figure 11. Mark Igloliorte, Untitled *from the* Observational Diptychs *series, 2010; oil on phone book page. One pair, as installed in* Material Traces: Time and the Gesture in Contemporary Art*, Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, Montreal. (Photo by Paul Litherland; courtesy Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery)*

Again, the *Observational Diptychs* are not primarily "representational" in the obvious sense, although they do evoke things in space in more or less recognizable ways. They unglue our tendency to view something called art as explicitly *expressing* and *representing* an emotionally charged moment in the artist's/agent's past. But these doubled pictures, with the dried former dampness of the paint clotting and pinching the paper like fingers grasping skin, call forth the interrelation between the material world and the gestural and perceptual meanings we make from this world as we pass through and inhabit it. In doing so they foreground (through their specific materiality, manipulated through bodily gesture cum bodily labor) the fact that making and experiencing art are always social, dialogical practices, always in process and taking place over time. By opening perceptual and thus psychological awareness and connectedness, Igloliorte's achieved depiction is performative. He draws us, with a brief hug of hello, into his

12. I installed this particular set of diptychs in my show *Material Traces.*

world of small recognitions. The diptychs are like the best short stories, which don't stop when you finish reading but continue to resonate. Igloliorte is giving us a psychologically inflected new materialism, a way of making art that insists upon the contingency of perception itself (suturing the inside to the outside, emphasizing the "intra-" aspect of intra-action).

With works such as Igloliorte's diptychs, the material traces of the processes of making enact but also "are" the work of art—the materiality and the gesture are, as Barad might argue, the intra-actively articulated stuff of art, which in turn differentially "matter" the artist as well as the experiencers (albeit, we'd have to argue, in different ways). The circuit I am exploring here through Igloliorte's project exemplifies Barad's critical reworking of our conception of agency in relation to materiality: in Barad's argument, the world of "phenomena" (including artists and works of art as well as interpreters) coarticulate one another in flows of mutually inflecting intra-actions: it is "through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the 'components' of phenomena become determinate and the particular embodied concepts become meaningful [...]. Phenomena are produced through agential intra-actions of multiple apparatuses of bodily production. Agential intra-actions are specific causal material enactments that may or may not involve 'humans'" (2003:815, 817).

Furthermore, this model allows us to complicate beliefs about performance or live art as uniquely performative in its effects. Practices such as Igloliorte's evoke "intra-actions"—rather than produce "representations" that are static and knowable by humans (viz. what Barad calls "representationalism," the belief behind the standard assumptions about art, that an artwork represents something in the world or some aspect of the emotions of the artist). As such, they are performative, producing materialities that "do" rather than simply "say" (or represent), materialities always already in process and working relationally. One of the points to be made here in relation to performance studies, then, is that just because a practice produces materialities that exist to be touched and otherwise experienced, does not mean it is *not* performative; and just because a work presents a live body does not mean it *is* performative.[13] New materialist theory allows us to complicate the notion of the performative as well as to enliven models of art and performance interpretation.

The new materialist interrogation of the Cartesian obsession with subjectivity as oppositional and superior to "objects" or "things"—the human as paradigmatic of existence and the idealist assumption that all stuff is only known in and through the human—is convincing and allows a more nuanced conception of how materialities work. Also compelling is the idea of relationality or, as Barad puts it, "intra-action," which provides a nuanced and productive way of thinking about how the materialities of the world, including humans, interrelate over time (see also Coole and Frost 2010: see esp. 2). I am not, however, in agreement with Barad and other new materialists from Latour onward in their claim that the rejection of "representationalism" and the related embrace of materialities somehow establishes a fully "posthuman" situation, nor that new materialism places us "beyond" (in opposition to) the evils of social constructivism, as some of this discourse can tend to imply.[14]

I would insist that any academic text proclaiming we are fully posthuman is disingenuous (to say the least) in not "intra-actively" acknowledging its own claims to truth value, and the reciprocal authority this intra-action casts upon the perceived discursive source of its claims (so

13. Again, the case in point is Abramović's emotionless sitting body in *The Artist is Present.* Perhaps part of her point was to deactivate her agency but in fact the end result was that her live body became enveloped in the spectacle created by the klieg lights and architectural/institutional setting; there was nothing in the experience of the work that felt open or in process, if that is what we mean more loosely when we use the word "performative" in the art context.

14. On this point, see Sara Ahmed's brilliant deconstruction of this opposition in the context of feminist debates (2008:23–39).

much is patently clear in Latour's brilliant but problematic "Modes of Existence" website and book project, where a singular author-name accrues immense authority around its supposed "posthumanism").[15] We do not, in fact, have to claim that the status of human consciousness is nil—that the "human" is ontologically the same as the "nonhuman"—just because we have a new understanding of ourselves as materialities interrelated with other materialities, and a new concept of our agency as intra-actively determined in continual engagements with the stuff of the world, of which we ourselves are constituted. The very attempts to articulate variations of this argument indicate that we still have a stake in our own consciousness, intellect, or whatever we want to call the force of our thought, as agential.

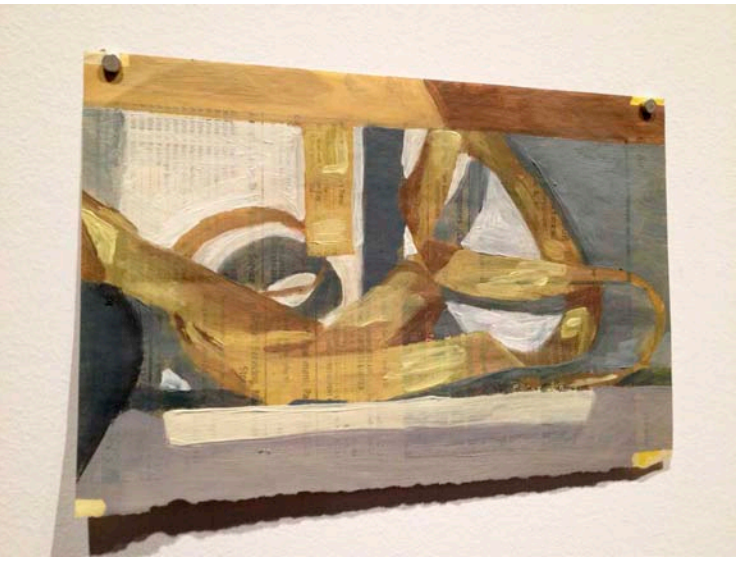

Figure 12. Mark Igloliorte, Untitled *from the* Observational Diptychs *series, 2010; oil on phone book page. Detail of one half of a diptych. (Photo courtesy of the artist and Christopher Braddock)*

A key way to tease out this problem in relation to art discourse is in fact to look at an example central to debates in the visual arts over the past 50 years: the gesture of the readymade. When Marcel Duchamp supposedly randomly chose industrially produced objects and designated them as art in the 1910s—such as the 1914 *Bottle Rack*—he provided an example for artists in the 1960s and 1970s who wished to turn art away from skill-based criteria of making as well as away from materialities that could be commodified. The readymade gesture, in its shift towards concept or idea over form, was central to what Lucy Lippard and others theorized as the "dematerialization" of art. As Lippard famously argued, artists were moving towards de-emphasizing the idea of an artwork as a discrete and final object ("dematerializing," becoming more explicitly time-based, and so turning their backs on modernist formalism, particularly the reduction of art to commodity perceived as occurring through the abstracting strategies of formalist criticism) (see Chandler and Lippard [1968] 1999:47; Lippard [1973] 1977). At the same time, and even Lippard admits this, other *kinds* of materiality came to play in the art situation, transforming and expanding the frame for what could be considered "art." The *Bottle Rack* is, after all, a metal bottle rack, with physical shape, heft, and a menacing materiality. The shift to concept or idea and away from form or thing was not in fact a total rejection of *materiality* as such: all artists with conceptually based practices continued to work with materials, albeit sometimes quite ephemeral ones such as actual bodies performing in actual spaces, or the bits and pieces of documentation and other remainders that sustained historical memory around each conceptual art gesture.[16]

Even more importantly to the point I am making here, the gesture of the readymade *referred back inexorably to the materiality of the choosing subject*, the artist. It was not just a "concept" that

15. See Latour (2013) and the website associated with the project (AIME 2013).

16. On the complexities of materiality in relation to live art, see Jones (2012:9–25).

drove the readymade gesture—although the foregrounding of concept or idea is central to what made the gesture so profoundly influential in American art in the 1960s and 1970s. A *body*—and one already defined and positioned as an artist—was central to the object's having been chosen (a variation on the having been made). Duchamp's putative consciousness is absolutely central to how we view (and value) the readymades. My point is that it would be fruitless, and a spurious political claim, to pretend that we have no investment in "human" consciousness just because we may have shifted our value system from a skill-based to a concept-based artistic practice, or from a humanist model of agency to one that acknowledges the force of materialities in how humans function and make meaning of the world. We are still, after all, making meaning and making choices as informed by past understandings (something other stuff cannot do in the same way).

For now, I want to make use of the radically reworked concept of agency that Barad's (and others') work on materiality opens up while setting aside this apparent paradox (or hypocrisy) relating to the endpoint posthumanism of much of this theory. Most importantly, Barad's model affords the possibility of understanding the mutual coextensivity of artists, artworks, interpreters/experiencers, exhibitions, institutions of art, not to mention the infinite expanse of the world's other discursive materialities, in the structures of meaning and value surrounding art and artists. As well, it allows us to begin to address, in a more focused way, how art "works" performatively (and, again, not necessarily progressively) across time to produce ever-farther-in-the-future responses and new "materialities" in Barad's sense. As Barad argues,

> The world is a dynamic process of intra-activity in the ongoing reconfiguring of locally determinate causal structures with determinate boundaries, properties, meanings, and patterns of marks on bodies. This ongoing flow of agency through which "part" of the world makes itself differentially intelligible to another "part" of the world and through which local causal structures, boundaries, and properties are stabilized and destabilized does not take place in space and time but in the making of spacetime itself. The world is an ongoing open process of mattering through which "mattering" itself acquires meaning and form in the realization of different agential possibilities. Temporality and spatiality emerge in this processual historicity. (Barad 2003:817–18)

It is precisely Barad's understanding of the "spacetime" implications of this conception of intra-action—and I want to stress that her description of one materiality making itself intelligible to another through structures that allow us to stabilize meaning momentarily perfectly applies to any art encounter—which points to the most profound implications of the kind of hybrid practices I inter-actively interpret here. Even Immanuel Kant in the late 18th century understood that the aesthetic, materialized as "art," provided a bridge of sorts between what was then understood as "subjects" and "objects."[17] This idea about art informed the rise of modernism and has defined the general understanding of the art experience to the present day. What is new about Barad's new materialist theory is that it allows us to throw out, or at least question, the opposition between subject and object and the idea of the artwork as a fixed endpoint (of making) or as a fixed beginning point (of interpretation). Through Barad's model, we can revise the notion of the artwork as bridge (in Kant's system, one almost as privileged as the agential materiality of the philosopher/subject at the other end) in order to articulate (or "discursively materialize," in Barad's terms) the artwork along with the *work* of its having been made. In so doing we foreground as well the *work* of interpretation and come to a new level of understanding of how art's materialities come to mean and to be valued.

17. See Kant ([1790] 2014) and Jacques Derrida's exploration of the Kantian aesthetic ([1978] 1987).

Concluding Thoughts

New Materiality and Artistic Labor

In coming to an ending it is worth running the model I have developed here up against arguments about labor in neo-Marxist theory—putting "dematerialization" and these hybrid "materialities" of recent practices in relation to the "immaterial labor" explored in the work of theorists such as Maurizio Lazzarato (1996) and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2001). Drawing on these theories, art historian John Roberts has argued that artists in the contemporary period have increasingly emphasized and explored the limits of artistic labor itself, as an extension of these broader developments wherein "the dissolution of the division between intellectual labour and manual labour" in society at large becomes "the basis for the [...] dissolution of art into social praxis" (2011:43). While I am not denying this aspect of contemporary art, the vibrancy of which is testified to by the thriving discourses and artworks circulating around the notion of "social practice," my interest has been in identifying a different trajectory wherein artists explore the ways in which materialities (including in some cases their own bodies) address others across ever-expanding future "spacetimes." One category does not preclude the other, but I have strategically focused on works that might not appear to be obviously or directly political or "socially engaged" in order to make a point about how art can *work* in more subtle ways through its materialities as such.

These hybrid practices suggest that the question of materialities in the context of art is not limited to handiwork or the production of objects to be circulated on the marketplace, as Marxist or neo-Marxist theory might seem to suggest. It is also about evoking and encouraging bodily responses and the possibility for social engagements: it is about what Lazzarato, drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin ([1975] 1992), calls "social creativity" (1996).[18] Bakhtin's account, like Lazzarato's for the most part, is thoroughly humanist and human centered, which is one aspect of it that differs strongly from the emphasis of the new materialists, with their emphasis on the posthuman. Bakhtin's social creativity as rearticulated by Lazzarato relates closely to sociologist Erving Goffman's theory of social performance where every encounter (implicitly, again, *between subjects*) is considered an interaction entailing "reciprocal influence," and thus defines meaning in social relationships ([1956] 1959:26). Both models of social interaction can be extrapolated to engage with artworks, particularly those activating the performative dimension; and, through new materialism, we can bring social creativity to materialities as such.

I have hoped in this article to push beyond new materialisms' paradoxical (at best, I think) insistence that we are beyond the human. I have also put the neo-Marxist emphasis on labor as relating solely to the circuits of capital in the background in order to focus on a broadened concept of Bakhtinian *social creativity*—one through which bodies manipulate materialities that affect them in turn and that are continually restaged and reinterpreted over time and in varied spaces to produce ever-changing meanings, thereby further transforming the materialities of future subjects and objects. Through my pointed interpretations here, the artworks I have engaged with thus remind us that the artist is one among a network of agencies activating what we call "art" and giving it meaning in the world. Art of a particular kind, proffering marks of having been made, opens itself to an encounter that animates or reanimates a range of materialities. In certain ways, interpreted through a particularly phenomenological model, I have tried to demonstrate how such works, while not explicitly "Marxist" or openly critical of the art marketplace, can be argued to animate the world in particular ways that produce ongoing effects and affects in an ever-unfolding futurity. I am claiming through my own activations of them that they might be seen as challenging the abstraction of labor that Marx identified as key to the working of capitalism; they might be seen to do a whole range of things, depending on who is engaging the works and intra-actively relating to them.

18. Lazzarato claims these arguments for the idea of "social creativity" in his essay "Immaterial Labour" (1996).

As Hegel argued of labor in general over two centuries ago, artistic labor becomes a means of highlighting the way in which, as Sean Sayers paraphrases, "subject and object [can] change and develop in relation to each other" (2007:435). Signs of artistic labor invested in and made visible through materialities or the stuff of art can thus activate the ways in which we are connected and "develop in relation to each other." They activate what Latour has argued are the networks binding us to our world. According to Latour, nothing could be more important than strategies for raising awareness of the interrelatedness of bodies and things in late capitalism, making us take account of the importance of developing new "modes of existence" in the 21st century (Latour 2013).[19]

Artists animating art through the labor of the material trace are not extending the traditions of art value based on human expressivity—we do not tend to interpret Leite's silicone bodily imprints or Cassils's molded lump of clay as "expressing" some interior aspect of their souls or personalities. Rather, by activating the signs of the works' having been made, the materialities of these works as we encounter them today could be thought of, precisely, as participating in this developing awareness Latour has explored, an awareness of the "many entanglements of humans and nonhumans," showing social and individual meaning to resonate in and through made things (Latour 2005:84). This might be the most interesting step for visual artists and, reciprocally, for art theorists, art historians, or interpreters in general to take in the early 21st century.

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19. Latour's main concern in *Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* (2013) is to save "Gaia," or the earth as an ecology being destroyed by human activity and the human tendency to disregard materialities (things) as extrinsic to human concern.

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