



Artworks as agential forces: a new materialist discourse on the aesthetics

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ENG Abstract: This research explores artworks as agential forces through New Materialism, challenging traditional anthropocentric perspectives by recognizing materials' active roles in artmaking. Grounded in theories by Merleau-Ponty, Karen Barad, and Jane Bennett, it redefines materiality as co-constitutive of art, emphasizing the interconnected agency between artist and material. Utilizing a diffractive methodology inspired by Barad, the study navigates material-discursive entanglements, highlighting how artworks enact dynamic interplays of forces. This approach not only enriches the creative process but also foregrounds art's potential to engage with socio-cultural and ecological dimensions, advocating for a post-anthropocentric creative paradigm. The findings advocate for recognizing materials' agential capacities within art practices, suggesting a shift towards inclusive narratives that underscore the ethical implications of our material engagements. By reimagining art's agency, this study contributes to the discourse on New Materialism, proposing an aesthetics that embraces the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors, thereby offering new insights into the transformative potentials of art in contemporary challenges.

Keywords: New Materialism, Artworks, Karen Barad, Agential Forces, Non-Human Actors.

ES Las obras de arte como fuerzas agenciales: un nuevo discurso materialista sobre la estética

Resumen: Esta investigación explora las obras de arte como fuerzas agenciales a través del Nuevo Materialismo, desafiando perspectivas antropocéntricas tradicionales al reconocer el papel activo de los materiales en la creación artística. Mediante una metodología difractiva inspirada en Barad, el estudio examina los entrelazamientos material-discursivos, destacando cómo las obras de arte encarnan dinámicas interacciones de fuerzas. Este enfoque no solo enriquece el proceso creativo sino también subraya el potencial del arte para abordar dimensiones socio-culturales y ecológicas, promoviendo un paradigma creativo post-anthropocéntrico. Las conclusiones instan a reconocer las capacidades agenciales de los materiales dentro de las prácticas artísticas, proponiendo un desplazamiento hacia narrativas inclusivas que resalten las implicaciones éticas de nuestros compromisos materiales. Al reimaginar la agencia del arte, este estudio aporta al discurso sobre el Nuevo Materialismo, sugiriendo una estética que reconoce la interconexión de actores humanos y no humanos, ofreciendo así nuevas perspectivas sobre el potencial transformador del arte frente a los desafíos contemporáneos.

Palabras clave: Nuevo Materialismo, Obras de Arte, Karen Barad, Fuerzas Agenciales, Actores No Humanos.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Theoretical Foundations. 3. Artistic Entities as Agents. 4. Methodological Considerations. 5. Discursive Exploration. 6. Revising Contemporary Art Theory and Practice. 7. Conclusion. References.

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1. Introduction

In the growing discussion of New Materialism and its connection to art theory, there is a significant re-evaluation of the ontological status of artworks (Leonard 2020). This proposes a shift from considering artworks as lifeless objects to acknowledging them as living agential forces. This scholarly work is not just an academic exercise, but a necessary response to the evolving complexities of contemporary art. It increasingly incorporates

ecological, digital, and bio-technological themes, requiring a theoretical framework that acknowledges the intricate interplay between materiality, technology, and artistry. This paper argues that integrating New Materialist philosophies into art theoretical discourses can radically reconceptualize the agency of artworks. This challenges the entrenched Cartesian dualism that has dominated Western thought and art criticism, paving the way for a new understanding of the materiality of art and its capacity for agency (Barad 2006; Bennett 2010).

Karen Barad's innovative concept of «agential realism» provides a robust framework that reconceptualizes artworks not merely as static entities but as dynamic participants in the fabric of reality. According to Barad, entities gain their identity and existence through «intra-actions,» a process in which they do not merely interact but come into being (Barad 2006). This idea fundamentally disrupts traditional views of artworks as inert, suggesting instead that they are dynamic forces capable of both influencing and being shaped by their surroundings. Complementing Barad's theory, Jane Bennett's exploration of «vibrant matter» reveals the intrinsic vitality present in all material forms, including the materials that comprise artworks (Bennett 2010). Bennett encourages us to perceive artworks as entities of vibrant matter, endowed with a form of agency that blurs the lines between living and non-living. This perspective, in harmony with Barad's assertions, deepens our appreciation of the agency inherent in artworks, inviting us to see them as active contributors to their environments rather than passive objects of contemplation.

The imperative to integrate New Materialism within art theoretical discourses stems from a critical examination of traditional materialist approaches that have historically relegated artworks to the realm of passive objects, devoid of any intrinsic agency or capacity to influence. New Materialism, by contrast, foregrounds the entanglement of matter and meaning, thus offering a robust philosophical foundation for reconceiving artworks as dynamic participants in the aesthetic and social spheres. This shift in perspective not only challenges the binary oppositions that have pervaded art theory, such as those between object and subject, matter and meaning, but also aligns with contemporary art's engagement with non-anthropocentric themes, thereby demanding a theoretical framework capable of accounting for the complex interactions between humans, non-human entities, and technological artefacts (Coole & Frost 2010; Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012).

By advocating for a reconceptualization of artworks as agential forces, this discourse engages with a multiplicity of philosophical traditions, including phenomenology, ontology, and ethics, inviting a reconsideration of the relationships between artists, artworks, and audiences. It posits that artworks, through their material presence and the affective resonances they engender, participate in a dialogical process with viewers, thus contributing to the co-construction of meaning and experience. This view not only challenges the anthropocentric biases that have characterized much of Western aesthetics but also emphasizes the interconnectedness of all material entities, suggesting a more inclusive approach to understanding art's role in society (Harman 2008; Bennett 2010).

Furthermore, the paper will delve into the methodological implications of adopting a New Materialist Perspectives in art research, addressing the investigative approaches that facilitate a deeper understanding of the agency of artworks. It will also explore the ethical and epistemological challenges that arise in the context of New Materialist art research, such as the question of how to adequately represent the non-human agency of artworks without reverting to anthropocentric frameworks (Barad 2006; Coole & Frost 2010). In summary, the integration of New Materialism within art theoretical discourses represents a critical and necessary advancement in our understanding of artworks. By challenging the prevailing materialist paradigms and reconceiving artworks as vibrant agential forces, this paper seeks to open up new theoretical and practical vistas for engaging with art. It underscores the significance of acknowledging the materiality and agency of artworks, thereby fostering a more dynamic and interconnected aesthetic discourse that resonates with the complexities of the contemporary art world.

2. Theoretical Foundations

The advent of New Materialism within the discourse on aesthetics and the philosophy of art heralds a significant paradigm shift, challenging the long-standing Cartesian dualism that has pervaded Western intellectual traditions for centuries. This emergent philosophical discourse critically reevaluates the ontological essence of artworks, advocating for a transition away from conventional perceptions of artworks as passive, inanimate entities devoid of agency (Hood & Kraehe 2017). Contrary to these traditional views, New Materialism posits artworks as vibrant, agential forces intricately woven into their material conditions and sociocultural contexts (Barrett 2013). This reconceptualization represents a critical departure from the established dualistic separation of mind and body, subject and object, culture and nature—a dichotomy deeply rooted in the philosophical inquiries of René Descartes in the 17th century, which has been foundational to modern Western thought (Descartes 2008).

This philosophical turn emphasizes the dynamic interplay between artworks and their environments, proposing that artworks possess the capacity to influence and be influenced by the myriad factors that constitute their existence (Barad 2018). New Materialism thereby introduces a novel perspective for understanding the role of art in society, suggesting that artworks are not merely reflections of their creators' intentions or cultural artifacts but active participants in the shaping of sociocultural narratives and identities. Moreover, the integration of New Materialism into art philosophy necessitates a reevaluation of aesthetic value, calling for an acknowledgment of the intrinsic agency of materials and the complex interactions between form, substance, and context (Horton & Berlo 2013). This approach finds resonance with Jane Bennett's concept of «vibrant matter,» which argues for the life-like properties of non-human entities and their contributions to political and ethical discourses, thus attributing agency to artworks and challenging the anthropocentric biases inherent in

traditional aesthetics (Bennett 2010). This perspective advocates for a more holistic understanding of art's role within the broader ecological and sociopolitical landscape. At its essence, the critique of Cartesian dualism and the emphasis on the agential capacities of artworks inherent in New Materialism signify a profound transformation in the philosophical understanding of art (Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2011). It invites contemplation on the implications of art's materiality and its intertwinements with the human and non-human world, thereby enriching our appreciation of art's transformative potential. This philosophical discourse not only extends the boundaries of art philosophy but also contributes to the ongoing dialogue on the nature of agency, materiality, and the interconnectedness of life forms, offering deep insights into the complexities of contemporary existence (Coole & Frost 2010). Rooted in a rich philosophical lineage, New Materialism intertwines insights from Baruch Spinoza's monistic ontology and Alfred North Whitehead's processual cosmology to forge a groundbreaking theoretical framework. Spinoza, in «Ethics,» challenges the Cartesian division, advocating for a universe composed of a singular substance manifesting both thought and extension, implying that everything exists as part of this divine essence (Spinoza 2000). Whitehead's «Process and Reality» envisions the universe as a network of processes and relations, introducing «actual entities» as the fundamental units of reality, constantly becoming through their relations with others. This perspective diverges from reductionist views, suggesting that the essence of reality lies in the dynamism of becoming and the intricate interconnections among all entities, thereby imbuing each with intrinsic value (Whitehead 1929).

Karen Barad's concept of «intra-action» represents a key innovation within New Materialism, challenging the traditional notion of «interaction,» which assumes the prior existence of independent entities that subsequently come into relation (Harris 2021). Instead, 'intra-action' posits that entities, including the very fabric of matter itself, emerge through these interactions. This perspective effectively disrupts the conventional dichotomy between subject and object, proposing a more entangled and co-constitutive relationship between humans and the material world. Barad's theoretical framework, known as «agential realism,» posits that the primary ontological unit is not independent objects with inherent boundaries and properties but phenomena, which are the ontological inseparability of interacting agencies (Barad 2006). Barad, drawing inspiration from quantum physics, extends this concept to challenge entrenched notions of reality, agency, causality, and the role of the observer in knowledge formation. According to Barad, phenomena (the result of specific intra-actions) are not mere passive occurrences but active processes of materialization that reconfigure and continuously reconstitute reality (Barad 2006). This reconfiguration encompasses the very boundaries and properties of the «components» involved in the intra-actions, underscoring that determinacy is not an inherent attribute but an emergent feature of intra-actions. Central to Barad's agential realism is the redefinition of the «apparatus» from traditional understandings as mere experimental setups in scientific inquiries to encompass broader sociomaterial practices that impact and are impacted by intra-actions (Barad 2006). Apparatuses, in Barad's framework, are dynamic world configurations that determine what matters and what is excluded from mattering. They are not merely observational tools but active participants contributing to the ongoing reconfiguration of the world. Through this lens, Barad highlights that scientific practice, and indeed all knowledge practices, are performative acts that help constitute and reconstitute reality itself. Furthermore, Barad emphasizes the entanglement of ethics with ontology and epistemology, arguing that since reality is constituted through specific intra-actions, it inherently involves ethical considerations regarding which intra-actions matter and why (Barad 2012). This ontological inseparability of ethics from the fabric of reality challenges traditional divisions between ethical, epistemological, and ontological concerns, suggesting that decisions, practices, and discourses are always already implicated in the ongoing becomings of the world (Kalpokas 2021). Barad's contributions to New Materialism and to feminist epistemology and science studies more broadly are profound. By proposing that matter itself is performatively constituted and dynamic, she lays a robust theoretical foundation for reimagining the material as an active participant in the world's becoming, rather than as a passive substrate awaiting inscription by culture, discourse, or human agency. Her work invites a radical reconsideration of the relationships between the human and non-human, the animate and inanimate, underscoring the profound interconnectedness of all matter and challenging the anthropocentrism that characterizes much of Western thought.

New Materialism, as a multifaceted philosophical movement, encompasses «vital new materialism,» «negative new materialism,» and «performative new materialism,» each offering unique perspectives on the ontological essence and agency of matter (Gamble et al. 2019). This discourse is enriched by acknowledging critiques and embracing the diversity within New Materialism, which underscores the complexity and dynamic nature of this philosophical endeavor. This movement not only redefines our understanding of the material world's agency and vitality but also challenges us to rethink the foundational principles of how we engage with and interpret the material and the ontological dimensions of reality (Gamble et al. 2019). It invites an interdisciplinary approach that integrates insights from the natural sciences, philosophy, and the humanities, emphasizing the intrinsic activity and relationality of matter. As such, New Materialism represents a critical and necessary departure from traditional philosophical paradigms, offering profound implications for future developments in philosophy, art theory, environmental ethics, and the social sciences.

3. Artistic Entities as Agents: Artworks in Phenomenological and Ontological Dialogue

The reevaluation of the essence and agency of artistic creations, positing them as active agents rather than passive objects, represents a pivotal shift within the ontology of art. This chapter delves into the intricate interplay between artworks and their viewers, exploring the phenomenological and ontological exchanges that underscore art's agential capacities. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Karen Barad's agential

realism and Jane Bennett's notion of vibrant matter, this analysis reveals the transformative potential of artworks from static objects to dynamic influences within their environments and interactions with observers (Kronberger & Krall 2021; Barad 2006; Bennett 2010).

Karen Barad's concept of agential realism, introduced in her seminal work «Meeting the Universe Halfway,» provides a critical lens through which to understand the agency of art. Contrary to traditional perspectives that posit artworks and observers as pre-existing entities, Barad (2006) suggests the notion of «intra-action,» where entities materialize through their relational engagements. This concept challenges the conventional subject-object binary, advocating for a co-constitutive interaction between humans and art. From this viewpoint, artworks are not passive entities but active participants that shape and are shaped by the viewer's engagement and interpretation (Marshall & Alberti 2014). According to Barad, the materiality of the world, including art, is inseparable from its meaning-making processes. This ontological interconnectedness invites a deeper exploration of the sensorial and affective dimensions of experiencing art, underscoring the active role of artworks in shaping and being shaped by the viewer's engagement. The phenomenological aspect thus becomes a site of ontological significance, where the material and the experiential 'intra-act' produces the artwork's presence and significance. Barad articulates the following argument in support of this perspective:

The primary ontological units are not «things» but phenomena-dynamic topological reconfigurings/ entanglements/ relationalities/ (re)articulations of the world. And the primary semantic units are not «words» but material-discursive practices through which (ontic and semantic) boundaries are constituted. This dynamism is agency. Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world. The universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming (Barad 2006, p. 141).

Complementing Barad's theoretical framework, Jane Bennett's exploration of 'vibrant matter' in her work *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Bennett 2010) highlights the animate qualities inherent in materials, including those that constitute artworks. Bennett's perspective encourages the recognition of artworks as entities imbued with a form of agency that blurs the distinctions between the animate and inanimate, thus reinforcing Barad's assertion of art's agential presence within its environment. Furthermore, new materialism, drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, perceives objects as components of broader assemblages or networks where human and non-human, organic and inorganic elements are intricately interwoven (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). This entanglement implies that works of art are not standalone objects but rather nodes of relationships that both exert influence and are subject to the influences of their connections (Schleusener 2021).

The phenomenological dimension of artistic agency, particularly influenced by the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, emphasizes the direct, embodied interaction between the artwork and its observer. Drawing on phenomenology, with a specific focus on Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the primacy of perception as outlined in *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 2013), this approach advocates for an immediate, experiential engagement with art. This facilitates a deeper inquiry into the communicative exchange between art and observer, extending beyond visual assessment to incorporate sensory and emotive experiences, thereby enriching the artwork's essence and relevance (Onishi 2013). This phenomenological interplay fosters an affective resonance, transforming the artwork from an object of observation to a participant in a lived experience. The material aspects of the artwork—its texture, hue, form, and spatiality—interact with the observer's sensory and emotional faculties, eliciting responses that resonate on both personal and collective levels. Consequently, the viewer's interaction with the artwork becomes an active component of its agency, influencing and being influenced by this encounter.

Empirical inquiries into the agency of art often highlight the artwork's ability to elicit reactions, stimulate thought, and foster dialogue. This is reflected in Nicholas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, where artworks serve as catalysts for reflection, discourse, and action, embodying, critiquing, and occasionally challenging societal norms, cultural values, and political ideologies. Bourriaud's «Relational Aesthetics» (Bourriaud 2002) underscores how artworks invite audiences into a reflective process that transcends aesthetic contemplation.

As the artistic «thing» sometime offers itself as a «fact» or an ensemble of facts that happens in the time or space, and whose unity (making it a form, a world) cannot be questioned. The setting is widening; after the isolated object, it now can embrace the whole scene: the form of Gordon Matta-Clark or Dan Graham's work cannot be reduced to the «things» those two artist «produce»; it is not the simple secondary effects of a composition, as the formalistic aesthetic would like to advance, but the principle acting as a trajectory evolving through signs, objects, forms, gestures... The contemporary artwork's form is spreading out from its material form: it is a linking element, a principle of dynamic agglutination. An artwork is a dot on a line (Bourriaud 2002, pp. 20-21).

Furthermore, the dynamic between artworks and viewers is recognized as a fluid process contributing to the ongoing construction and reconstruction of meaning (Downey 2007). The practices of interpreting art—through criticism, curation, and personal contemplation—emerge as arenas of intra-action, where the demarcations between the artwork and its interpretations are continuously negotiated and reformulated. This evolving dynamic accentuates the artwork's role as an agent in the collaborative genesis of its meaning and significance. Recognizing artworks as agents necessitates ethical deliberations concerning the responsibilities of artists, curators, and audiences. The ethical dimensions of artistic agency, as discussed by Alfred Gell in «Art and Agency» (Gell 1998), explore the influence of artworks on individuals and communities, prompting reflections on the implications of art on societal ethics. The capacity of art to inspire, challenge, or offend invites scrutiny of the ethical dimensions of artistic creation and presentation, intertwining ethical considerations with aesthetic and conceptual deliberations.

In conclusion, the reconceptualization of artworks as agents capable of engaging in phenomenological and ontological dialogues heralds a transformative shift in our perception of art's societal function. Through the lenses of agential realism and vibrant matter, we gain insights into the intricate exchanges between art and its observers, highlighting art's ability to influence and be influenced. This perspective not only enhances our understanding of art's transformative power but also emphasizes the ethical obligations inherent in recognizing artworks as contributors to the broader sociocultural and ontological landscapes. Consequently, the agency of artistic entities compels a reevaluation of art's essence, advocating for a nuanced and dynamic interpretation of its role in the co-creation of reality.

4. Methodological Considerations

The New Materialist study of art necessitates a reevaluation of conventional methodological approaches, moving beyond traditional frameworks to incorporate a nuanced understanding of the agency of artworks. This shift in perspective requires an innovative blend of empirical, phenomenological, and ethical methodologies that respond to the dynamic interplay between matter and meaning. This section delves into the methodological implications of New Materialist art research, exploring the challenges and opportunities presented by this philosophical approach.

The New Materialist framework posits that artworks are not merely passive objects but active participants in their environment, capable of influencing and being influenced by a multitude of factors. This conceptualization demands a methodological approach that can account for the complex, reciprocal relationships between artworks, viewers, and the broader sociocultural context. Following Barad's (2006) notion of intra-action, research methodologies must move beyond the examination of pre-existing entities and relationships to explore how artworks and their contexts co-emerge and co-constitute each other. Artworks transcend the realm of mere aesthetic contemplation, assuming the role of active agents entrenched within a dynamic network of relationships. They actively engage in both shaping and being shaped by the sociocultural environment, serving as pivotal junctions through which a variety of forces—be they material, conceptual, or social—interact and undergo transformation. This proactive involvement of artworks within their surroundings necessitates a methodological shift that recognizes and probes the intertwined nature of these interactions. Embracing a New Materialist perspective in the examination of artworks is in harmony with an enhanced understanding of the world's complexity and interconnectivity. In this view, traditional distinctions between subjects and objects, as well as between culture and nature, start to dissolve, unveiling a reality profoundly interconnected, characterized by perpetual flux, negotiation, and evolution.

Phenomenological methodologies, emphasizing the lived experience of interaction with art, present a valuable approach for exploring the affective resonances elicited by artworks, as Merleau-Ponty (2012) suggests. By concentrating on the embodied experience of viewing or engaging with art, researchers are able to delve into how artworks serve as agential forces that shape perceptions and emotions. This approach to phenomenological analysis is vividly illustrated through Merleau-Ponty's examination of Cézanne's work.

Art can help us suspend these naturalistic and humanistic habits by encouraging us to observe the very «fabric of brute meaning» as it takes shape. Like philosophy or the body, painting is also a fold; it expresses the «reflexivity of the sensible» whereby it becomes «impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted.» When Merleau-Ponty quotes Cézanne — «The landscape thinks itself in me and I am its consciousness» — it is to draw attention to the way the artist's body poses a question to a world whose vectors seem in response to «emanate from the things themselves, like the patterns of the constellations.» This, too, is congruent with a description of folded flesh as immanently generative. «There is no break at all in this circuit; it is impossible to say that nature ends here and that man or expression starts here. It is, therefore, mute Being which itself comes to show forth its own meaning.» This is not an act of mastery, but the selfdisclosing of matter that is 'pregnant' with its form and that poses itself by its own means (Coole & Frost 2010, p.104).

A phenomenological encounter with works grounded in neo-materialism deconstructs the dichotomy between the viewer and the work. This approach not only enriches the analysis of contemporary artworks but also imbues the artwork itself with life and agency. For example, consider an installation art piece like Olafur Eliasson's «The Weather Project,» showcased at the 'Tate Modern'. This artwork transformed the museum's Turbine Hall into a simulation of the sun set against a mirrored ceiling, creating a shared, immersive environment. Here, the artwork is not just a passive object but an active participant that shapes viewers' perceptions and interactions (Wang 2018). The visitors become part of the artwork, their silhouettes reflected on the ceiling, blurring the boundaries between the art, the environment, and the audience (Starck 2009). This exemplifies New Materialism's emphasis on the entangled nature of artworks and their environments, where the material and discursive elements of the art piece intra-act with the human and non-human elements present, creating a dynamic, co-constitutive relationship. In addition, Marina Abramović's «The Artist Is Present,» a long-duration performance piece at the Museum of Modern Art, where she sat in silence and made eye contact with any visitor who sat opposite her, showcases the active engagement between artwork and viewer. This piece foregrounds the material presence of the artist's body and the reciprocal engagement with the audience, challenging conventional notions of the passive viewer and active artwork (Senior & Kelly 2016). It illustrates how the relational dynamics between human bodies can be conceptualized as a form of artmaking, where the boundaries between artist, artwork, and audience are dissolved, resonating with New Materialist ideas of entanglement and the co-constitution of entities through their interactions.

Empirical investigations, informed by New Materialist theories, can provide concrete examples of artworks' agential capacities, demonstrating how they engage with and transform their environments. These studies may employ a variety of methods, including case studies, participant observation, and material culture analysis, to explore the material-discursive practices through which artworks exert their agency (Coole & Frost, 2010). For instance, consider a case study employing a New Materialist arts-based methodology that examines the interrelations among humans, living spaces, and creative media. This approach shifts away from positioning humans as the sole arbiters of meaning, instead emphasizing a more integrated understanding where meaning emerges from the interactions between these elements (MacDonald & Wiens 2019). Such research must be attentive to the ethical implications of representing artworks and their non-human agency, challenging anthropocentric biases and acknowledging the intrinsic value of non-human entities.

New Materialist methodologies confront significant ethical and epistemological challenges, particularly in relation to the representation of non-human agency. Traditional research ethics, which focus primarily on human subjects, must be expanded to consider the rights and interests of non-human entities, including artworks themselves (Braidotti 2013). This requires a rethinking of consent, harm, and benefit in research, taking into account the entangled interests of all participants in the research process. Epistemologically, New Materialist art research challenges the notion of objective knowledge production, recognizing that researchers are themselves part of the material-discursive intra-actions they study. This implies a reflexive approach to research, wherein researchers critically examine their own assumptions, biases, and contributions to the co-constitution of knowledge (Haraway 1988). Such reflexivity demands an openness to the unexpected and a willingness to engage with the material agency of artworks in ways that may disrupt conventional narratives and interpretations.

In conclusion, the methodological considerations inherent in New Materialist art research necessitate a departure from traditional approaches, embracing innovative methods that can account for the complex agency of artworks. By integrating phenomenological inquiry with empirical investigations and addressing the ethical and epistemological challenges presented by this framework, researchers can develop a deeper understanding of the transformative potential of art. This approach not only enriches our knowledge of artworks and their effects but also contributes to the broader project of redefining the theoretical and practical landscapes of art theory and practice.

5. Discursive Exploration: The Materiality of Encounter and Aesthetics More-than-Human

In the discourse of New Materialism, the affective resonances of artworks are not merely by-products of human interaction but are integral to the artworks' material constitution. The theoretical perspectives offered by Grosz (2008) and Ahmed (2004) provide a foundational framework for understanding how artworks, as material entities, participate in the generation of affect. The engagement with a work of art, specifically through the medium of its materiality, instigates the production of an emotional response. This phenomenon surpasses the traditional dichotomy of object and subject, unfolding instead into a significant event. This event, characterized by its emergent properties, engenders a form of being that resonates beyond the immediate interaction, propagating its effects throughout the broader existential and ontological fabric. Building upon this conceptual framework, Grosz further refines Deleuze's analysis, elucidating that:

There is no common quality artworks must have, not even within any particular art form: but the capacity that all artworks have to be located within a milieu of other artworks — even as upheaval and innovation — means that they are constituted not through intentionality but through the work itself, through its capacity to be connected to, or severed from, other works. All works of art share something in common, whatever else may distinguish different forms, genres, and techniques from each other: they are all composed of blocks materiality becoming-sensation. Art is what intensifies, produces sensations, and uses them to intensify bodies. Whatever materials compose them, works of art monumentalize neither events nor persons, materials nor forms, only sensations: «The work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else». Does this mean that works of art exist only to the extent that they are sensed, perceived? Are such works reliant on external observers to sense them? Not at all: the sensations produced are not the sensations of a subject, but sensation in itself, sensation as eternal, as monument. Sensation is that which is transmitted from the force of an event to the nervous system of a living being and from the actions of this being back onto the world itself (Grosz 2008, p. 71).

This conceptualization is further nuanced by Bennett's (2010) exploration of «vibrant matter,» which advocates for the recognition of matter's lively potential to affect and be affected, situating artworks within a network of vibrant, affective forces. The discussion of affective resonance is enriched by Povinelli's (2016) examination of geontologies, which delineates the governance of life and non-life within the contemporary political sphere. Applying Povinelli's critique to art's materiality underscores the political dimensions of affect, suggesting that artworks engage in the broader discourses of biopolitics and geontopolitics through their material-affective presence. This extension highlights the interplay between art, matter, and the socio-political, challenging the boundaries that delineate the animate from the inanimate within the aesthetic realm (Povinelli 2016; Bennett 2010).

The move beyond anthropocentrism within art theoretical discourses necessitates a critical engagement with the more-than-human world. This engagement is exemplified by Latour's (2005) actor-network theory, which posits the agency of both human and non-human actors in the construction of social and material

realities. Within the context of art, this perspective encourages a consideration of how non-human entities—ranging from the materials of art creation to the ecological and technological systems that artworks comment on or are embedded in—participate in the aesthetic experience. Every piece of art emerges from the interplay among diverse participants. Situated within these intricate networks, art possesses the capacity for self-reflection, enabling it to introspectively examine these relationships. Consequently, it underscores a parallel engineering, fostering open forms that celebrate the concept of the trans-individual. Through this process, art has the ability to unveil and demystify conditions that are frequently obscured and taken for granted, making them accessible for scrutiny (Halsall 2016).

Haraway's (2016) concept of the Chthulucene further expands this discourse, offering a vision of multi-species collaboration and cohabitation that challenges the Anthropocene's human-centric narratives. Haraway's call for making kin with the non-human is particularly resonant in the realm of art, where practices of collaboration, material experimentation, and ecological engagement can enact the ethical and creative possibilities of living and making in a damaged world (Haraway 2016; Latour 2005). The ethical implications of a post-anthropocentric art theory are further explored through the lens of Plumwood's (2001) environmental culture, which critiques the dualistic thinking that has historically separated humans from their environment. Integrating Plumwood's ethics of care and mutual recognition into art theory promotes an aesthetic practice that is not only reflective of but also responsive to the entangled relations between humans and the more-than-human world. This approach aligns with the New Materialist emphasis on material entanglements and the distributive nature of agency, advocating for an art theory and practice that foregrounds ecological interconnectedness and responsibility (Plumwood 2001; Haraway 2016). The new materialist framework reconceptualizes art as an active agent, thereby inaugurating a more-than-human aesthetic paradigm. This paradigmatic shift extends our understanding of art beyond human-centric interpretations, allowing for a profound exploration of our interconnectedness with non-human entities, such as ecosystems and technological apparatuses. It compels us to reevaluate our existence in a relational matrix that includes the more-than-human world, encouraging a holistic contemplation of our engagements with the environment and the intricate web of life that sustains it. Furthermore, this aesthetic perspective underscores the urgency of addressing planetary sustainability, prompting a critical reflection on the impact of human activities on the earth's ecosystems (Averill *et al.* 1998). Through this lens, art becomes a conduit for fostering environmental consciousness and advocating for sustainable practices that harmonize human existence with the planet's ecological balance.

This discursive exploration underscores the transformative potential of New Materialist theory in reimagining the aesthetics and philosophy of art. By delving into the affective resonances of artworks and challenging anthropocentric frameworks, New Materialism fosters a more inclusive understanding of art's role within the contemporary ecological and technological landscape. The integration of ethical considerations and the recognition of the more-than-human in art theoretical discourses not only expands the horizon of aesthetic appreciation but also articulates a vision for a sustainable and responsible art practice. As such, New Materialism opens up fertile ground for future research, inviting scholars and practitioners to explore the intersections of art, aesthetics, and the new materialisms in crafting a responsive and reflective art theory and praxis for the 21st century.

6. Revising Contemporary Art Theory and Practice

The reevaluation of art theory and practice through the lens of New Materialism necessitates a profound reconsideration of the epistemological and ontological foundations upon which the art world has historically been constructed. This paradigm shift, rooted in recognizing artworks as dynamic entities with agency, fundamentally disrupts traditional art historical narratives and critical methodologies that have privileged human intentionality and interpretation as the primary sources of meaning within art. The implications of this shift are manifold, extending across the theoretical, practical, and pedagogical domains of art, thereby heralding a comprehensive transformation in how art is conceived, created, taught, and engaged with. Furthermore, this shift moves towards an aesthetic that allows us to rethink ourselves on a broader scale, reevaluate our relationships with new entities through artistic projects such as bioart, enable new discourses about humanity and the connections between human and non-human beings, and move away from unified and hierarchical organizations (Benítez Valero 2014). The integration of New Materialist thought into art theory challenges the anthropocentric narratives that have dominated art historical discourse (Nail 2023). This reconceptualization of artworks as agents in their own right invites a rethinking of art history that considers the material properties of art objects not as mere substrates for human expression but as active participants in generating aesthetic experiences and meanings. Art historians and theorists are thus compelled to develop new frameworks that accommodate the agency of materials and their role in shaping the trajectory of art historical developments.

For artists, the implications of New Materialism are profoundly transformative, suggesting a practice that is deeply engaged with the materiality of the medium. This approach encourages artists to explore the potentialities inherent within materials, allowing for a co-creative process in which the artist and material collaboratively generate the artwork. This materially engaged practice not only fosters innovation and experimentation but also necessitates consideration of the ecological and ethical dimensions of material usage, thus promoting sustainable artistic practices that are responsive to contemporary environmental challenges. In practice, Olafur Eliasson's *Ice Watch* (2014) serves as a poignant example. Eliasson transported massive ice blocks from Greenland to public spaces in Copenhagen and later, London, to physically manifest the reality of climate change (Hornby 2017). Here, the ice's melting process—its transformation and

eventual disappearance—engages viewers in a material dialogue about temporality, change, and loss. The materiality of ice becomes an active agent, conveying the urgent message of environmental degradation in a direct, sensory manner that abstract statistics or reports cannot achieve. Similarly, Anicka Yi's installation *Biologizing the Machine* (tentacular trouble) exemplifies New Materialism's core principles by dissolving the boundaries between the organic and the synthetic. Underpinned by what the artist describes as the «biopolitics of the senses,» the work explores how machines facilitate sensory experiences, challenging traditional notions of perception and embodiment (Yi 2019). Yi employs the motif of the biofilm—a sticky, slimy, tactile material that adheres to man-made surfaces and forms dense, multispecies architectures—to create environments where biological and technological entities coalesce. In the context of our precarious environmental and human future, *Biologizing the Machine* serves as a promising, albeit volatile, avenue for co-adaptation, co-invention, and multiform becoming. The installation prompts a reevaluation of materiality and agency, illustrating how technological entities can possess life-like qualities and participate in dynamic networks of relations. By embodying New Materialism's reconfiguration of matter as active and generative, Yi's work urges a reconsideration of ethical and philosophical approaches to the increasingly complex interplay between biology and technology.

In the realm of art education, the pedagogical shift advocated by New Materialism emphasizes experiential learning and material exploration. This approach challenges traditional pedagogies that prioritize conceptual development and technical proficiency, instead advocating for an education that fosters deep engagement with the physicality of artmaking (Rosiek 2017). By encouraging students to explore the affordances and resistances of materials, art educators can cultivate an awareness of the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors and promote a more holistic understanding of creativity. An example of New Materialist pedagogy in action is found in the practices of contemporary art schools that embrace material exploration as a core component of their curriculum. Materials, fabrication processes, and objects play pivotal roles in the ecosystem of meaningful education in art, complementing the evolution of conceptual understanding and societal influence. New materialist theory underscores the significance of matter in shaping our lived experiences, asserting that animacy extends beyond traditionally recognized living entities to encompass all forms of matter. By cultivating a profound comprehension of their material expressions of the world, creators and students generate novel insights and enrich their experiences (Garver 2019). This approach cultivates an awareness of the material as a co-creator in the artistic process, encouraging students to engage with materials not just as tools but as partners in dialogue.

In the fields of humanities and social sciences, 'new materialism' is collectively referred to encompass a variety of perspectives united by what is commonly termed a 'turn towards matter' (Fox & Alldred 2017) and New Materialism opens up novel research pathways that explore the intersections between art, technology, and ecology. These interdisciplinary inquiries can shed light on how digital and bio-art practices challenge conventional notions of agency and materiality, contributing to a broader understanding of the role of art in addressing ecological crises and technological transformations. Furthermore, research in this area can explore how art can serve as a catalyst for environmental awareness and action, thereby aligning artistic practice with the imperatives of sustainability and ecological stewardship. The adoption of New Materialist perspectives in art theory and practice represents a crucial paradigmatic shift that redefines the role of art in contemporary society. By acknowledging the agency of materials and challenging anthropocentric biases, New Materialism fosters a more inclusive and interconnected understanding of art, one that is attuned to the complexities of the Anthropocene (Conty 2018). As we navigate the challenges of this new geological epoch, the insights from New Materialism offer a valuable framework for re-evaluating our engagement with art, highlighting its potential to inspire change and foster a more sustainable and equitable world.

7. Conclusion

This paper embarked upon a scholarly inquiry within the domains of New Materialism, with a particular focus on reconceptualizing artworks as endowed with agency. By engaging with the theoretical constructs of entanglement, intra-action, and the agential realist framework as advanced by Karen Barad, this research elucidates that artworks transcend their traditional status as inert objects of human creativity, functioning instead as dynamic co-participants in the co-constitution of reality. This analysis reveals that through their interactions with both human and non-human actors, artworks disrupt the anthropocentric paradigms that have historically underpinned art theory and practice. Such a paradigmatic shift demands a rigorous reevaluation of the conventional understandings of art creation, its reception, and its societal roles.

The insights gleaned from this scholarly endeavor significantly contribute to the contemporary discourses in art theory by offering a sophisticated reconceptualization of materiality that moves beyond the binary distinction between the human and non-human. By acknowledging the agency inherent in artworks, this study aligns with and extends the corpus of posthumanist scholarship that advocates for a more encompassing, relational ontology—one that recognizes the intricate web of interdependencies characterizing all forms of existence. Furthermore, this research delineates new avenues for scholarly exploration, particularly within the spheres of art conservation, curation, and public engagement with art. The recognition of artworks as active agents underscores the necessity for adopting practices that honor the dynamic essence of art objects, including their material susceptibilities and their capacity to influence and be influenced by their surroundings and interacting audiences.

Looking ahead, it becomes paramount for the constituents of the art ecosystem—encompassing artists, curators, theorists, and pedagogues—to integrate these scholarly insights, fostering a praxis that is both

ethically mindful and responsive to art's complex ecological entanglements. Such an approach will not only enrich our collective appreciation for the multifaceted interactions that delineate our existence but will also illuminate the diverse roles art plays in cultivating our communal knowledge and consciousness. Furthermore, this investigation encourages further scholarly examination into particular instances of art practices and exhibitions that intentionally incorporate New Materialist principles. In addition, empirical research focused on audience receptions to artworks as agential entities could yield profound understandings regarding art's societal transformative capacities. Moreover, an exploration of New Materialism's intersections with digital and new media art promises to reveal innovative perspectives on materiality and agency in the contemporary digital milieu.

In summation, this study makes a substantial contribution to the academic dialogue concerning New Materialisms, while simultaneously offering actionable insights for the broader art community. By engaging with the agential capacities of artworks, we chart a course towards more sustainable, ethical, and inclusive art practices that mirror the dynamic and interconnected nature of our shared world.

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