



Material Strategies in art practice

1.

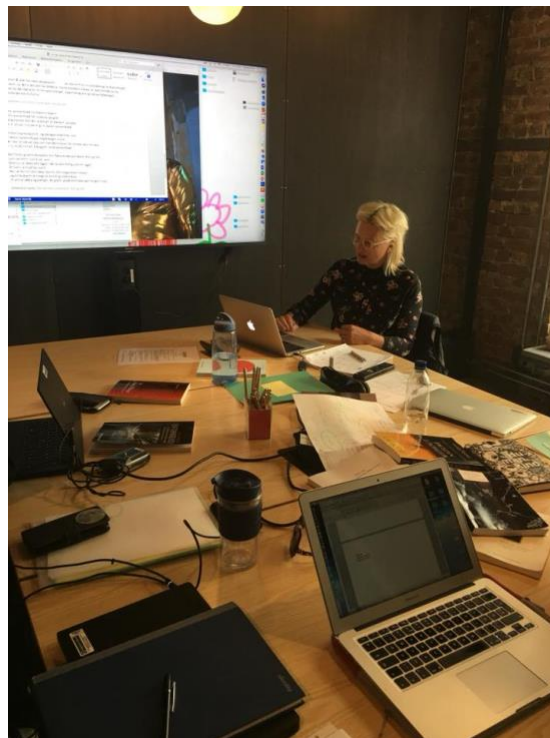
A thought that has little consciousness of it self, is a thought in action. It is thinking in becoming of an experience. It is an emerging activity that calls for intensities towards coming – and – expression, a thinking that is permeated by rhythm, with intensities at the border of the knowable.

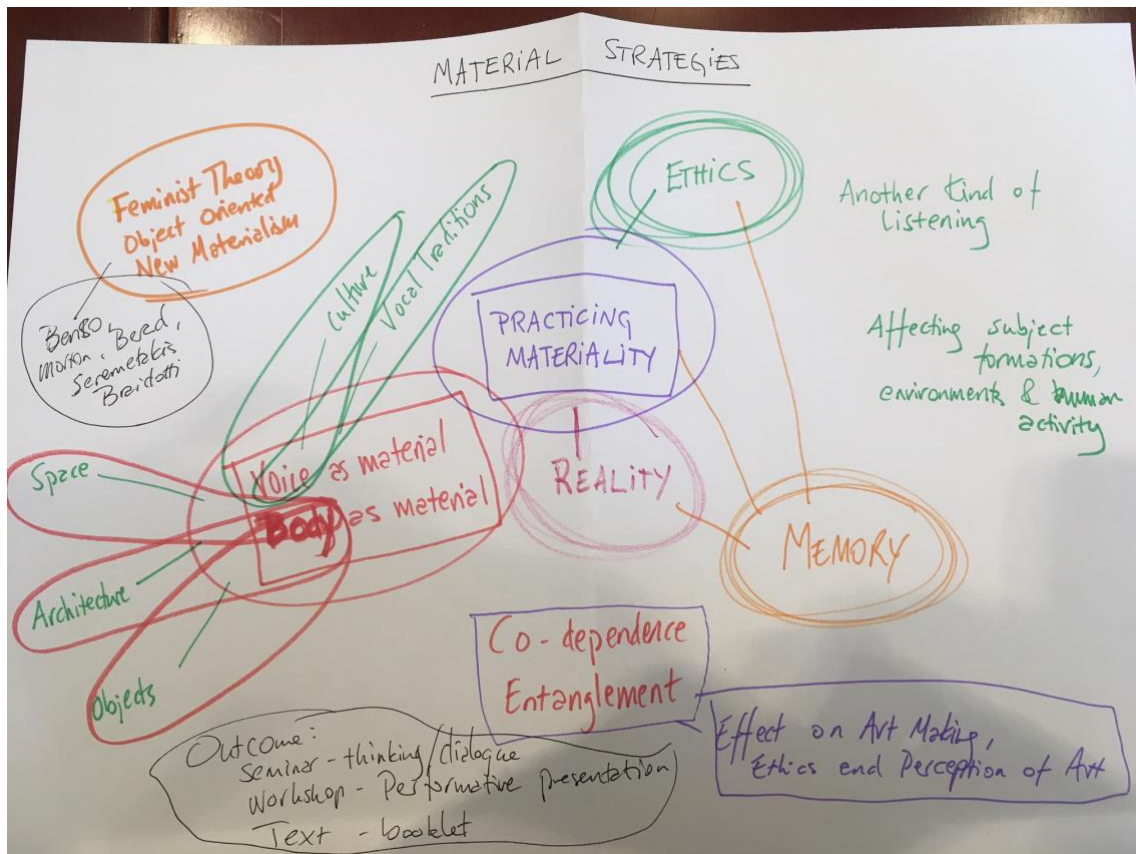
Erin Manning 2015: 126
(my translation)

What can art do? How does a materialist philosophical approach affect the way we do art, and how does it change our expectations when experiencing art? Material Strategies is a deeply ethical project because the thinking provokes a paradigmatic change in our perception of what art can do, how it is perceived, and how it is created.

Erin Manning discusses *speculative pragmatism* in the article quoted from above. She explains the concept as a research method where everything starts in the middle. It is speculative because there are movements not yet captured, and it is pragmatic because what is actualised also must be articulated – this text is an attempt at such articulation. Speculative pragmatism is an approach that is interested in what escapes order and pays attention to the knowledge that is invented in the flight of excess. This corresponds well to the working method that is starting to crystalize out of the research experiments undertaken during the one year of Material Strategies.

Material Strategies has dealt with ethics through engaging with philosophical frameworks, which has challenged us to approach our creative processes differently related to thinking and doing. Thinking and doing are not separate activities. They are different aspects and actions in the creative process, constantly intertwining. The research started with a dialogical platform where we explored and discussed the theoretical framework proposed by object-oriented philosophies and new materialism, especially informed by the writings of Timothy Morton, Rosi Braidotti, and Karen Barad. This sparked our curiosity into connecting to other thinkers and writers in lines of flight, or intra-actions as Barad calls it, crisscrossing over our various artistic fields: scenography, dance, acting, voice, costume, performance art, space etc. We have also listened to the voices of Jane Bennett, Nina Sun Eidsheim, Donna Haraway, André Lepecki, Graham Harman, Ann Merete Otterstad, Marx and Engels, Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt, Slavoj Zizek, and Judith Butler. There are also many other sources that have informed the work as the initial inspiration intra-act and forms new materials, thoughts, memories, words and situations. Karen Barad explains intra-action as opposed to interaction, which ‘necessitates pre-established bodies that then participate in action “with” each other’ (Hickey-Moody 2018: 1) across difference and specificities. Intra-action is ‘a dynamism of forces’ (Barad 2007: 14) where it becomes difficult to know where a movement starts, and how everything involved in a situation or an experience exchange, blend, influence, and mutate into yet unknown things. Our research throughout the past year has been an expansion of the mind, body and spatial connections we live and create with. It is a daily practice of stretching in order to move and be affected outside known and familiar territories. It is a thinking that does not only happen within the subjective minds involved in the project. It is a thinking that acts within as much as without the body. The sensuous body think, but images, spaces, sounds, objects, food, natural materials, weather etc. also think with us, affecting the thinking-doing that is shared.







When reality is ordered within specific conceptual frames of methodology and judgement of quality, reality becomes a subjective and social construct. As an alternative Manning suggest art understood as a pathway, not yet an object, a form or with a content. She refers to the concept of 'in-act', which William James' calls 'something doing'. Something is of experience, formed by an event affecting how an experience establishes itself as something knowable. Reality is neither 'real' nor 'fictional'. In-act is when experience becomes action and is felt as action (Manning 2015:124). Reality is then as much the in-act that takes place, as what it has given form to. That is both not-yet-form (unspeakable and speculative) and form as affect or result of the in-act. In comparison Timothy Morton speaks of form as an aesthetic trace of the movement between cause and effect. This understanding transgresses the binary subject-object, where all parts involved in an experience is both thinking and doing, forming something different oscillating between known and unknown.

This one year of artistic research based on material strategies, has been an attempt to experiment with artistic methods, challenging existing paradigms of 'quality' and 'authorship'. Manning calls for another type of stance to be taken, one which emerges from the chaotic middle, engaging us in symphatic ways with the unknown that is triggered through the uneasiness in an experience that cannot yet be categorized. Our research presentation at Norwegian Theatre Academy on the 10th May 2019, I experienced in this way as a messy heap, where the research is felt rather than reflected from the outside in hindsight. We are still trying to articulate what to learn from the excess and intra-connections that were activated in the event. I am not sure what was formed was great art, or even art at all. But this seems less relevant at this stage. What was opened up was a beginning of material practice as a method of 'thinking-doing', which will be further explored. Let me try to exemplify this

through verbalised images of the in-acts that took place pointing to how they have affected the research.

2.

Research [then] can change established patterns of thinking. One way it can do this is through affect and image.

Anna Hickey-Moody 2013: 84

The way thinking and doing intertwine is obvious to me. What we read, think and discuss as concepts, slowly mature in our psycho-physical bodies, affecting how we act and how we relate and sense the world around us. This is a slow process that takes practice. Anna Hickey-Moody writes about affect, relating to Deleuze and Spinoza, as related to the increase or decrease of the body's power to act. Affectus, she writes, is 'the materiality of change' (ibid.: 81). In Material Strategies there are certain things that have affected the work in particular.

Styrofoam dancing to sound waves:

<https://www.facebook.com/SciencePhileOfficial/videos/2040321422932490/>

The music of books:

<https://www.facebook.com/Ronny.Landau/videos/2090824954310011/>

Things that changed thinking and doing, if only just a little. We have been in touch with so many things that have affected us in the process. However, if I should point to some particular things it is the essay "Appearance as War" by Timothy Morton, emphasizing ambiguity as a place to find accuracy. It is a place neither active nor passive – reality is in constant movement, and I have liked to work with the concept of 'rocking': How everything 'rocks' and how I can create and live being conscious of this rocking. Ambiguity and rocking as a conceptual, physical and material approach to in-act ask for a sense of tuning into the rocking movement of each thing. We also worked on listening and spending time, dwelling with things not looking for results or outcomes but waiting for things to happen.

Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt's essay "Counting the Hours of the Night" (my translation) where she discusses how art students counting their working hours, questions what late capitalism counts as 'work', arguing that to change established patterns of thinking and doing, to let affectus affect us (which is a slow process), we also do 'invisible work' during our sleep, or when walking. She writes 'If we look at night shift, the affective, regenerative and reproductive domestic work, when the light is off, we are dealing with an extreme case: the most immaterial and literally darkened work'. (my translation).

The seminar we arranged in February 2019, were important for many reasons. To put object oriented philosophy on the agenda for artistic research and creative processes. To open a platform to think and do together, bringing together doers and thinkers from many perspectives. Dr. Rick Dolphijn from the University in Utrecht brought to me new theoretical input, introducing Michelle Serre's concept of 'quasi

objects' that are created by humans and to serve us. They are objects only supposedly independent, and they come in three categories: religious objects, objects of war, and monetary objects. Dolphijn argues with Deleuze that there is something post-human or non-human about art. Thus art is not a quasi object because art deals with finitude, with crisis, and with necropolitics. Art and philosophy reveals other worlds, it is about world making. Art lures us into ways of dying. Art is a negotiation with the margins of life, argues Dolphijn. Again it is about listening to the unheard, the unspoken and the unknown. This demands patience, time and not rushing to find 'results'. In the workshop of the project, we constantly had to remind ourselves to not look for answers, but to see what is already there. To reveal the other potentials of our practices, and when avoiding the capitalist demand of product, the work needs other parameters for evaluation.

Per Roar's lecture performance during the seminar, showed a beautiful example of how everyday reality intertwines with thinking and artistic practice. The material surroundings of Per Roar on his everyday walks through the city of Oslo, made him stumble over things that grew into his work.

We had a two weeks practice based workshop. Half way, we shared some of our doing with Professor Ann Merete Otterstad who studies affect theory and new materialism in relation to early childhood education. Here are some points from our meeting with Otterstad taken from the notes of Ingvild Holm:

Trafo 3. May 2019

The method is the most important (which she said last, but which I put at the top)

- not looking for human representation or meaning, but diffraction.
- Not putting the human at the centre of things.
- She is not interested in interpretation, but AFFECT. The effect of the discomfort is the affect (the expression of the emotion).
- She says we animate language. That we operate in a different praxis, more painterly, more vibrating.
- We should not look for explanations or reflections (mirror something that already exists), that is more of the same (Deleuze and Guattari).
- The concept of diffraction (Karen Barad/ Donna Haraway): like waves meeting a stone, creating many smaller waves.
- If we are the stone...
- She says she has stopped using the word reflection, a concept that stand in the way to think outside the ethnocentric.
- Matter matters...
- We have learned that we can sit on the outside and have opinions about something, but we are a part of it.
- Relational theory, Hegelian thinking, dualism. What other kinds of relational thinking exist in art and theatre?
- What other kinds of relations can we think of that can open up?
- What exist in the gaps?
- How to get passed representation? And why?
- Process oriented philosophy and philosophy of difference.
- Affect as body (things the way the work)
- Alternatives to the focus on identity formation.

- The collective can share things without words.

Electa Behrens shared this:

Partial list of strategies I think we have tried out this year: deorientation, dis-identification, feedback loops of broken expectations, daring to be 'wrong' to be 'right', amplifying materials, uncontrollable elements, listening, time and humour.

The first day of the workshop, we offered time to encounter the context: the space, the place (Trafo in Oslo), and each other. We started with a silent exploration of two hours. This was a beginning to set a frame related to how we use time, how we are confronted with our own expectations of producing, of doing something productive with a known outcome. The research has explored ways to counter this need, and still being able to articulate something useful. The time spent, and shared, is a time of the senses: of looking, smelling, feeling, tasting, listening, thinking, sleeping.

3.

Artistic method serves to extract material, blocs of sensation, percepts and affects, from 'territory' (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 167). The nature of such a method is specific to the work, indeed, to the artist. It is a process that occurs on a plane of composition: in other words, it is a process of making material mixtures or assemblages that affect thought through modulating the body and its emotions.

Anna Hickey-Moody 2013: 86-87

What we have been researching is to develop and find 'new geographies of meaning' (ibid.: 93). This implies walking into unknown territory, to walk in places where there is not yet any pathway. It is an attempt to ride waves into places we have not been rocking in before, and where rocking is about exploring that place rather than forming it as an answer or result. Places that challenge feelings and anxieties of production, purpose of research, time well spent, work, expectations etc. Stretching the thinking through the doing, where thinking *is* the doing. Instead of knowing, perhaps there is trust in the space, the people, the things and the time spent together.

I believe the method that is slowly developing, is perhaps not really a method at all, but what Erin Manning frames as 'against method'. In her writing speculative pragmatism always goes beyond method, as method is always a frame that limits new connections and movements. We have not really been looking for a method or anything specific at all. We have been researching how materials (both theoretical and concrete) affects and moves us, trying to do so without too many preconceived expectations. The question remains of what 'knowledge' is, how it is formed and what it serves. Manning refers to 'researchcreation' as a concept based on artistic creative and interdisciplinary actions and compositions. It will always be specific for each place, space, connections and intra-actions. Thus the method will be to articulate a method for each experience or project perhaps. In retrospect, the process that has taken place and developed may look like a method, Manning points out, 'but to

repeat it will never bring it back. Because techniques must be reinvented every time, and the thought always has to leap.' (Manning 2015: 131)

Instead of inventing new methods working across our various artistic disciplines, the work pointed us towards discovering what is already there inherent in the way we work, but reframed and rearticulated in relation to the ethics and strands of thought we were exploring. What change is time and listening: the attention given to other things present in the assemblages of our working context. I remember a moment in our presentation at NTA in May 2019, where I was crawling on all fours among personal items unpacked from the bags we carry in our everyday life and work, encountering a foot, listening to the sound of a pinecone encountering a finger and a microphone. Listening means spending more time and working slower, which I find to be a political as much as an ethical act: environmental friendly and counter capitalist. The future does not need more growth or invention. The world needs connective and slower activity. The value of the research has not been the artistic outcome as such, but rather the beginning of a working ethics that connects to the ways we are present in the world in a different way, which may eventually form other artistic expressions.

The shimmering, like the light sparkling on a lake in the twilight: that's the basis of movement. It is like how listening is the basis of music, how listening is the basis of language. It's a space of attunement, of catching waves and riding them, where the question of who is influencing whom becomes very ambiguous.

Morton, T. (2016)

Photos by Patricia Canellis Flesjø and Camilla Eeg-Tverbakk

Bibliography:

Barad, K. (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press

Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1994) *What is Philosophy?*, trans. G. Burchell and H. Tomlinson, London: Verso

Hickey-Moody, A. (2013) "Affect as Method: Feelings, Aesthetics and Affective Pedagogy" in Coleman, R. & Ringrose, J. (eds.) *Deleuze and Research Methodologies*, Edinburgh University Press Ltd

Hickey-Moody, A. (2018) "New Materialism, Ethnography, and Socially Engaged Practice: Space-Time Folds and the Agency of Matter" in *Qualitative Inquiry* 1-9, online November 22, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800418810728> (downloaded 15. July 2019)

Manning, E. (2015) "Mot metode", in Otterstad, A.M. & Reinertsen, A.B. (red.) *Metodefestival og øyeblikksrealisme – eksperimenterende kvalitative forskningspassasjer*, Fagbokforlaget.

Morton, T. (2016) "Appearance is War" in J. Brouwer, L. Spuybroek, S. van Tuinen (eds.) *The War of Appearances: Transparency, Opacity, Radiance* (Rotterdam: V2_Publishing)