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## **AESTHETIC INTRA-ACTIONS**

Editorial

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# Practicing New Materialisms in the Arts

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“The neologism ‘intra-action’ signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual ‘interaction,’ which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action.”

Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), p. 33

Crafted by the American physicist, philosopher of science and feminist theorist Karen Barad, most extensively in her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, the concept of intra-action has during the past decade come to exert a marked influence on contemporary theories and research. Not only is this concept central to Barad’s own theory of agential realism, which strives to replace the assumed separateness of world and words, or the world’s material processes and human discursive meanings, with their mutual dependence and co-constitution. The concept has also become a buzzword in several, and partly interwoven, wider strands of research across the humanities, arts and science studies. These strands range from posthumanist thinking and critical science and technology studies to new materialist thought in its feminist and other incarnations. But what does intra-action entail besides its idiosyncratic reconfiguring of the familiar word “interaction”, and in addition to having become a staple term - some might argue a new piece of jargon - in certain theoretical debates and fields of research?

This special issue addresses this question at fresh intersections of new materialist thinking, artistic research, and art studies. For the emerging area of research initiatives labelled as new materialisms, intra-action has proved an attractive concept, because it helps to highlight the constitutive significance of technological, human bodily, and diverse non-human materialities in cultural, social and environmental realities without positing them as a self-contained sphere. Instead, intra-action allows one to explore how forms of materiality result from their differing interplays with discourses that signify them, and with historical and cultural practices that shape them. Crucially, this notion at the same time enables one to

acknowledge that materialities themselves consist of active processes, which are capable of affecting, surprising and changing discourses and social practices in turn, always within specific webs of relation.

As evidenced across disciplines and international arenas, questions of materiality have during the past few decades solidly returned or emerged to the agendas of artistic research and art studies as well. In addition to emphasizing the active – albeit fundamentally relation-bound – nature of materialities, the notion of intra-action suggests another interesting resonance especially with the burgeoning forms and methodologies of artistic research. By stressing the emergence of agencies, entities and modes of knowledge through relations, it comes close to the underlying objective of artistic research concerning the constant transfers between or co-formations of practice and theory: or of ways of doing, making, feeling, thinking, and conceptualizing.

This issue dedicates itself to the intersections of new materialist theory and artistic or practice-inspired research through a sustained conceptual focus on intra-action and via a wide variety of previously not presented projects. The distinctive main focus of the issue is the *intra-active implementation of the notion of intra-action itself*. Instead of taking this concept as a theoretical given, the issue's contributions aim to work with, enact, test, expand, and modify it within diverse intra-active settings comprised of highly varied artistic processes, research questions, disciplinary fields of action, and analytical and political concerns.

Despite this variety, there are some key guiding questions that connect the different expositions of the issue. These include the following:

What kinds of intra-actions can be discerned in the practices of contemporary arts spanning from sculpture, sound and music to performance, painting and curating?

- How to conceive of and research artistic practices intra-actively?
- What methodological insights, research techniques, and further concepts can intra-action inspire across art studies?
- How to reconsider the work and situatedness of the artist/researcher with the notion of intra-action?

This issue is a collaborative initiative and effort of the working group [New Materialisms Embracing the Creative Arts](#), which is part of the project *New Materialism: Networking European Collaboration on 'How Matter Comes to Matter'*, funded as action [IS1307](#) by COST: The European Cooperation in Science and Technology supported by the Horizon 2020 (2014–2018). The issue theme and many of its writing and art collaborations co-constituted themselves through the meetings of the working group, which have over the past five years taken place in Barcelona, Potsdam, Belgrade, Maribor, Turku and Warsaw, bringing together art researchers,

philosophers, artists and curators from 15 countries in Europe, but also Australia and Canada.

The opening image of this issue is based on an artwork by artist Karolina Kucia, one of our group members, and a co-writer for one of the issue's expositions. In 2014, this image became the logo or rather an activating emblem for the New Materialist action, with hopes to inspire collaborations through its gently connective materiality of the red wool thread. For this work, Kucia used documentary material from a workshop conducted by John Grzinich and Tero Nauha for art students in Tomar, Portugal. In the workshop, based on the collaborative practice of Brazilian artist Lygia Clark, the students created an entangled collective by moving together with the wool thread. Aptly, Kucia's piece was originally created as the cover illustration for the Finnish translation of *Chaosmosis* by Félix Guattari (2010), a book that embraces ethico-aesthetic practices in imagining new collectives.

This issue is divided into four sections: Ecologies, Soundings, Visual Material Practices and Collaboratives.

**Ecologies:** This section studies the material practices of environmental art and performance as intra-actions or co-productions with and between the non-human / inhuman and the human. Dorota Golańska focuses on geoart in Jim Denevan's gigantic drawings on the landscape. Through her material-discursive reading, she argues for an intra-action with the environment and various apparatuses; for a composite practice of entangled complexities and art as a productive reconfiguring of these relations. In the second exposition, Fiona MacDonald presents her feral practice, which leaves the self-referentiality of a studio in order to communicate with other creatures such as ants and foxes in a likewise co-productive intra-action. The contribution of Nathalie Blanc and Frédéric Barbe approaches, in turn, environmental forms such as community gardens beyond the oppositions of nature and culture. In their work, situated in an urban context, they propose a move from the notion of agency to that of intra-agency. mirko nikolić's and Neda Radulovic's exposition elaborates on posthumanist thinking and critical plant studies. Through these postulations, they develop a critique of the traditional human-centrism of performance studies. They tackle this anthropocentrism by focusing on how intra-action in artistic practices may rebuke humans' separation from other material forms or dichotomist relationship with plants and other non-human agencies.

**Soundings:** This section explores how musical sounds, especially those within practices of singing, emerge in relations of mutual influence with particular bodily techniques of sound production, aesthetic predilections, theoretical concerns, and questions of sex and gender. Notably, both expositions included in the section concern styles and processes of vocalization related to western 'classical' singing and opera. The exposition of Taru Leppänen and Milla Tiainen grows from their collaboration with singer, voice teacher and trans man Demian Seesjärvi. It aspires to

an interplay between Seesjärvi's vocal performances, his reflections on the transformations of his body and voice during his sex/gender re-affirmation process, and the theoretical insights entailed by Barad and other new materialist thinkers. Through this interplay, Leppänen and Tiainen examine practices of 'classical' singing as a distinctive milieu for grasping how materialities and the relations within which they take shape matter a great deal to trans experiences and ways of being or becoming. In her exposition, Elisabeth Belgrano seeks to engage with a non-existing voice: a voice that is just about to sound, but which is already potentialized by thoughts and words related to a particular musical style and piece and which participates in the developing materialities of singing. By focusing on a 17th-century vocal manuscript, Belgrano explores a non/voice as a mattering method for the art of singing.

**Visual-Material Practices:** This section gathers together three expositions that address and reconfigure various art practices including curation, sculpture and photography by exploring how the visual inseparably entangles with the material. Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, Zuzana Štefková and Helena Grande Vicente study three different art exhibitions as complex phenomena by focusing on how exhibitions happen, are in the making, in the intra-action of the material and the discursive, and how these intra-actions are necessarily more-than human, thus contesting the univocal role of the curator. In so doing, they offer insights to the agential capacities of the exhibition space and art 'object' in situations as varied as understanding and experiencing post-internet art, curating the geopolitically sensitive exhibition, and writing a wall text while the exhibition is in the making. In her exposition, Heidi Tikka asks how responsive knitted sculptures that she has created over the years can contest the logic of inter-active art and be understood rather in terms of intra-action. To study this, she addresses multiple material encounters that involve embodied actions of a human participant and the conceptual-technical-material staging of those elements that co-constitute the installation as a material assemblage in an exhibition. Rebecca Najdowski and Jane Vuorinen's exposition engages with two distinctive types of photographic practice, photo-embroideries and landscape photography, from the perspectives of an art historian and an art practitioner. Through focusing on surface tensions, they show how photo-embroidery and landscape photography are not just about 'embroidery on a photo' or 'a photography of a landscape'. Instead, they can be understood as intra-active processes in which, for example, landscape with its materialities can co-produce a photo.

**Collaboratives:** This section focuses on the potentialities of the notion of intra-action in relation to collaborative or cooperative art and knowledge practices. The key question is how discursive forms of knowledge take shape in intra-action with various material practices and different collaboratives. The first exposition by Helen Palmer, Jessica Foley, Vicky Hunter and Karolina Kucia presents a

collaborative exchange between these four practitioners with different artistic backgrounds. Through this exchange, the exposition proposes new understandings of and ways of enacting situated knowledge. In particular, it offers the notion of ‘parasitic endeavour’ as a means to facilitate divergent and emerging knowledges linked at once to various disciplines including creative writing, dance and performance. In the second exposition, Anna Catherine Hickey-Moody presents her work with a transversal methodology that is developed in socially engaged art practices with children and with an adult audience in South East London. The main focus of Hickey-Moody’s exposition and research methodology in-the-making is on inter-faith families and on reconsidering faith itself as an intra-active process. Finally, the exposition by Mika Elo engages diffractively with some of his older works and their gestural elements. Elo juxtaposes Barad’s and Niels Bohr’s concepts with the more allegorical construction by Walter Benjamin. In setting different patterns of thought apart and putting them together, this exposition aims for a diffractive retracing of some of Elo’s works.

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