

COLLISION

A New Aesthetic of Postnature:
Tara Donovan's Material Modulations

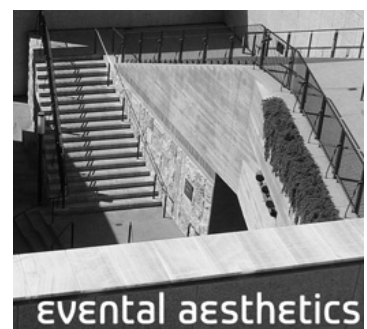
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ABSTRACT

The work of Tara Donovan represents a new aesthetics that manifests the conceptual nuances of posthuman thought via material assemblages. Her work creates a detour that, instead of having the fluidity of digital networks as its point of departure, starts with material objects and repetition as textual elements that create postnatural landscapes permeated with biomorphic, organic, fluid motions that seem to expand our understanding of the natural. I compare her aesthetics to James Bridle's New Aesthetics. New Aesthetics embody the technological properties of the digital by accumulating virtual traces of material networks, documenting and curating various examples of immaterial physicalities. Tara Donovan's work represents a reversed form of New Aesthetic that, instead of bringing the 'digital' into the 'physical' in an automated and mechanical way, infuses and shapes materials according to the fluid possibilities of the natural — organically and meticulously. Both artistic movements — be it from the virtual into the physical or from the natural into the artificial and vice versa — are conducive to a new aesthetic territory: a postnatural landscape that manifests as immaterial physicality.

KEYWORDS

Immaterial Physicality
Postnature
Naturecultures
New Aesthetic
Next Natures
James Bridle
Tara Donovan



We are creating a new nature in the world. – James Bridle

Introduction

As digital technologies and nanotechnologies reshape our relations to the material world, we witness the emergence of *immaterial physicality*: “a transfer instantiating the immaterial in a physical form, a ‘print-out’ whose tangibility then becomes the operative dimension in asserting the presence of an immaterial, digital, ‘information space.’”¹ In mainstream Western cultures, the informational structure and logic of computational code give form and structure to contemporary life as it mediates the cultural and political outputs of data networks. Code shapes the noise, visual identity, and political interface of contemporary life. The artificial blends with the natural in such an intimate way that the aesthetic modulations of culture become a perfect example of Donna Haraway’s *naturecultures*: collective expressions created and distributed by a network of agents that operate in a world of pervasive and invisible prosthetics connected to the material-semiotic assemblages of biological bodies. If “the machinic and the textual are internal to the organic and vice versa in irreversible ways,” then so is their aesthetic.²

It is in this context that I wish to analyze the work of Tara Donovan as representative of the aesthetic dimensions of a postnature.³ Having had to come to terms with the *end of nature* and the *death of nature*, environmentalism now faces the stark realities of climate change and the possible collapse of human civilization.⁴ There is no going back to the purity of classic notions of nature, as it is now impossible to separate human, non-human, and inhuman. Welcome to postnature: a chaotic mesh of uncontrollable geological change set in motion by humans. Postnature is the head-on collision of what was once considered “natural” and “artificial.” It “involves not simply pushing nature to the edges of our experience but rather getting inside of life itself and rewriting its genetic instructions.”⁵

There are few better examples of the aesthetics of postnature than the work of Tara Donovan. Instead of taking the fluidity of digital networks as its point

of departure, her work begins with material objects and repetition as textual elements that create postnatural landscapes permeated with biomorphic, organic, fluid motions that add a new dimension to natural aesthetics. Her work “allows the shape of the chosen material to determine the form of the piece until it becomes magically other ... managing to transcend both materiality and gimmickry in a culture that celebrates both.”⁶ Tara Donovan’s art is able to achieve a double aesthetic effect: by subverting and extrapolating the physical properties of material objects (density, depth, transparency, smoothness, etc.), she transports us into a dimension vibrant with designs that create an overlap between biomorphic structures and the genre of technological aesthetics present in contemporary computer-generated art. This aesthetic overlap between the images of her biomorphic material objects and digital landscapes of generative art creates yet another layer of fusion between the architecture of physical spaces and informational spaces — seamless continuity and flow is made manifest in minute detail.

Material Infinity

My work functions as a field of material that could extend infinitely.
Tara Donovan

Tara Donovan’s sculptures and installations explore the material properties of common objects to create elaborate and meticulous objectscapes that are able to evoke the organic aesthetics of flows and forms found in nature. Her work is characterized by a fluidity which is usually only found in natural organic flows— even though her materials are industrial, mass-produced, ordinary objects such as pins, styrofoam cups, and buttons. One can sense a silent movement in them evoking the mysteries of light and shadows, the ethereal and the translucent, expressing immateriality through the properties of matter itself. Her work is solid and precise, rooted in the “pragmatic rigor” of previous artistic movements; however “it brings it into our own period by suggesting digital, cellular, emergent networks. It seems to speak to the systems that are shaping our lives.”⁷

Another significant characteristic of her work is the capacity to materially modulate the semiotic qualities of given objects. *Transplanted*, a piece in which thousands of sheets of tar paper are stacked and ripped to create the effect of a flowing sea of solid black marble, is a perfect example: the patterns and shape of the piece’s topography are waves in harmonious flow whereas the sheer volume and mass of the piece are reminiscent of the landscape of a valley made of black marble. Matter and meaning are equally modulated to transform and transcend

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the material properties of her medium. Tarpaper sheets, originally fragile and brittle, become portentous monuments that challenge our perception. In Tara's own words:

How do I go from an object to something that is more like a field, something where as you walk past it, your eye moves over it, and it actually visually shifts? So that you're looking at the same thing but it's changing constantly? ... The smaller it is, the choppy it seems and the more earthy it looks. Whereas the larger it gets, the more like a sea it becomes.⁸

Tara Donovan's work is in many ways a metaphor representing the infinite sea of big data and its network aesthetic without utilizing the technologies of the digital. The biomorphic qualities of her work are reminiscent of the generative aesthetics of algorithmic art, as in the DIY possibilities of weavesilk.com.⁹ *Toothpicks* and *Drawing Pins* are examples of her meticulously created works which enable us to visualize complex patterns of interaction and object disposition that are usually only found in data visualization systems. The giant mesh of big data within which we are all enclosed can be felt pulsating in the background of Tara's installations. Beyond aesthetic correlations between physical and virtual worlds or natural and artificial worlds, Tara's artistic practice also functions as a scientific ground of experimentation with the very properties of matter, using the forces of physics as artistic means of creative enunciation. *Toothpicks* deploys geometry and an intricate network of structural relations designed to surpass the limitations of gravity:

What holds the thousands of toothpicks together? Adhesion — a combination of density, friction, and gravity, from which a few stray toothpicks on the floor around the base seem determined to escape. Those errant shards are important to the sculpture, however, because they hold the visual key to what could conceivably happen, especially in a seismically unstable setting. In a world that is alive and constantly changing, the static sculpture seems to expand beyond its physical limitations, encompassing the floor beneath your feet, the room in which you stand and the inherent instability of all perceptual experience.¹⁰

A different kind of physical expansion can be seen in *Bluffs*. Here, piles of translucent buttons seem to expand organically much in the same way that fungi, yeasts, and molds propagate themselves in nature. Here, the artist moves past the order of geometrical patterns found in nature and proceeds into the disorder of biological movement and disjunct accumulation. Chaosmosis, defined as “the ensemble of conditions which render possible the emergence of individual and/or collective instances as self-referential existential Territories, adjacent, or in a delimiting relation, to an alterity that is in itself subjective,” seems to be Tara Donovan's ground of practice and artistic manifestation.¹¹ Through the poetic-

existential catalysis present in her plastic discursivity, we gain access to emergent levels of material enunciation. Her work is able to transubstantiate the aesthetics of biology into that of technology, once again recalling Guattari's production of subjectivity in which "the quality of the base material matters little ... what does matter is the mutant rhythmic impetus of a temporalisation able to hold together the heterogeneous components of a new existential edifice."¹²

Such existential edifices — with boundaries defined by the physical constraints of matter itself — are pregnant with *leibhaft*:

The carnal presence (*leibhaft*) of the things themselves answers to the sensuality of the intentionality of consciousness. It is across this sensuality of consciousness ... that consciousness approaches the things, that it visits them, and comes into contact with them ... sensuous cognition [is] a cognition for which the objects are not just intersections of relations, but sensible proximity, dense and carnal presence.¹³

Carnal presence encapsulates and manifests "the immaterial physicality of the 'new aesthetic,' present[ing] a convergence of ... machinic, semiotic, and biologic productions."¹⁴ Tara Donovan's work is representative of this 'new aesthetic' which operates via chaosmosis and sensuous cognition. I dare to speculate that the chaosmosis which is blatantly present in Tara's work occurs not in relation to the production of human subjectivity, as in Guattari's definition of the concept, but instead in relation to the production of a *postnatural subjectivity*, materially established and object-oriented, which could be understood as a realm of immaterial physicality in itself.

Next Natures

Koert Van Mensvoort, an artist and philosopher from Amsterdam, has created a digital platform dedicated to the concept of *next nature*. Next nature represents a shift from the traditional dichotomy between the worlds of human technology and the natural world, moving forward into a vision of the future in which there is no difference between artificial and organic processes. This vision aims to achieve "a balance between both the declining biosphere and the emerging technosphere — between old nature and next nature."¹⁵ Through the concept of next nature, one is transported to the fields of Heideggerian thought in its exploration of the origin of the work of art as an organic process of creation in which the very essence of the

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things being made is intrinsically connected to the matter and physicality of such things. This intrinsic connection is made visible by Tara Donovan's work:

I'm completely relying on the physical properties of the material before me, kind of going where it naturally inherently wants me to go, so that things always wind up mimicking nature in a way.¹⁶


Matter is, for Tara Donovan, a living force of creation that gives direction to her practice as an artist, which she often describes as a remanufacturing of the intended fate of manufactured materials. Industrial processes, seen as the very antithesis of nature and responsible for the degradation of our planet's ecosystems, are reappropriated by the artist as a new kind of raw material for the creation of organic patterns. *In the industrial ashes of nature, the artist seeds the emergence of a postnature.*

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James Bridle has been celebrated as the icon of a *new aesthetics* of immaterial physicalities generated by combining visual landscapes using online digital curation. Network aesthetics is, in James Bridle's work, represented by the "dripping of the virtual into the real" as seen in the materialization of digital aesthetics as industrial and 3-D printed objects.¹⁷ His new aesthetic is about curating shapes, textures, and patterns which were only possible thanks to digital technologies and are now made physical by 3-D printing and industrial manufacturing.

This new aesthetics originates from the virtual and expands into the physical, creating an interstitial territory in which both co-exist. Tara Donovan's work creates the same kind of interstitial territory in which the virtual and the physical seem to be intertwined. However, her work originates from matter itself and expands into the virtual by creating fields of sensuous cognition around spatial objects which are permeated by the same type of immaterial physicality found in Bridle's work. It is through the material accumulation and manipulation of synthetic and mass-produced objects that Tara Donovan is able to achieve a similar aesthetic continuum between material and virtual levels of reality to that which James Bridle has been achieving via digital curation. Both artistic practices belong to a social network of industrial consumption that is based on capitalist accumulation of images and objects. Both use accumulation and excess as an

aesthetic language. Both kinds of immaterial physicalities have political implications and could be understood as the active operations of a new aesthetic.

If the work of James Bridle is iconic in regards to a new aesthetic that represents the technological properties of the digital by accumulating virtual traces of material networks, documenting and curating various examples of immaterial physicalities, then Tara Donovan's work would also be iconic in regards to a reversed form of new aesthetic which, instead of bringing the 'digital' into the 'physical' in an automated and mechanical way, infuses and shapes materials according to the fluid possibilities of the virtual — organically and meticulously — generating in this process a new aesthetic of the postnatural. Both artistic directions — be it from the virtual into the physical or from the natural into the artificial and vice versa — are currently converging within the new aesthetic territory of the postnatural. 

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Notes

- 1 Michael Betancourt, "Automated Labor: The 'New Aesthetic' and Immaterial Physicality," *Theory Beyond the Codes*: tbc048, *CTheory* (2013).
- 2 Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 15.
- 3 Paul Wapner, *Living Through the End of Nature* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2010).
- 4 See Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1990). And Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* (New York: Harper Collins, 1980).
- 5 Merchant, 119.
- 6 Christine Muhlke, "The Right Stuff: Tara Donovan Is The Ultimate Material Girl," *TMagazine*, February 11, 2011.
- 7 Nicholas Baume and Carol Kino, "The Genius of Little Things," *The New York Times*, September 23, 2008.
- 8 Tara Donovan, interview with Lawrence Weschler. "The Work of Tara Donovan," *The Design Observer Group*, October 9, 2008.
- 9 <http://weavesilk.com/>
- 10 Christopher Knight, "Art review: Tara Donovan at San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art," *Los Angeles Times*, January 14, 2010.
- 11 Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-aesthetic Paradigm* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 9.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 13 Alphonso Lingis, "Hyletic Data," in *Analecta Husserliana*, vol. 2, ed. Anne-Teresa Tymieniecka (1972), 99.
- 14 Betancourt.
- 15 Koert Van Mensvoort, "Razorius Gilletus – On the Origin of a Next Species," *Next Nature*, March 1, 2010.
- 16 Donovan, interview with Lawrence Weschler.
- 17 Bruce Sterling, "An Essay on the New Aesthetic," *Wired Magazine*, April 2, 2012.

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