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Vital Materialism

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Introductory Editorial: Towards Vital Materialist Aesthetics

Mandy–Suzanne Wong

Morton Feldman – ally of Jackson Pollock, composer of a gorgeous string quartet which is six hours long and rarely rises above *pianissimo* – this man said to Karlheinz Stockhausen: “sounds are very much like people. And if you push them, they push you back. So, if I have a secret: don’t push the sounds around.’ Karlheinz leans over to [Feldman] and says: ‘Not even a little bit?’”¹ The joke is that when it comes to describing how composers compose, how musicians make music, both Feldman and Stockhausen are correct, and Feldman knows it. Music making is the pushing and pushback of humans against sounds, of instruments against sounds, of papers and instruments against humans and sounds, and always, always vice versa. Feldman, composer of *Intersections* as well as *The Rothko Chapel*, spoke of composition as a collective act of human and nonhuman agents.

As a composer beleaguered by Western classical traditions, Feldman confessed to the desire to hear “the right note in the right place with the right instrument”; but at the same time he embraced the fact that sounds and instruments never do exactly as they are bidden.² They push back. “[S]ounds exist in themselves – not as symbols,” he wrote.³ Thus the “sounds in every piece intuitively seem to do things” of their own accord.⁴ So do musical instruments, which Feldman refused to regard as mere amplifiers of human ideas. And so do pens and paper: as he composed, the author of *Coptic Light* and *Triadic Memories* happily encouraged the grain of paper and the flow of ink to influence his musical choices. “I have always found it more beneficial to experiment with fountain pens than with musical ideas,” he said.⁵

In his bold yet stumbling attempts to describe how nonhumans were at work in his own work (in front of audiences who, steeped in 1980s–style American consumerism, were far from predisposed to such ideas), Feldman used the word “material” to refer to musical nonhumans: instruments, pages, sounds. Traditionally, he believed, composers were “very distant from material”: “One of the problems with [what’s traditionally called ‘fine art’] is that it’s not concerned with the medium, it’s concerned with itself, that the idea is ego.”⁶ By contrast, Feldman wanted his own music and artistic processes to de-emphasize human ego (“the idea”) and enjoy what happened when nonhuman “material” came under the spotlight. For Morton Feldman – who once wrote a seventeen-minute orchestral piece inspired by old bits of paper – composition wasn’t an act of creation but a “conversation with [his] material” that was also a physical engagement with fidgety, inspiring, and stubborn nonhumans.⁷ Attempting to describe the give and take involved in the compositional process, he said, “I work very much like a painter, insofar as I’m watching the phenomena and I’m thickening and I’m thinning and I’m working in that way and just watching what it needs.”⁸ He responded to the hints, the calls, and sometimes outright commands issued by instruments and sounds as by simply being themselves, they asserted what they would and would not do. Like a painter who feels the canvas push back against his hand and moves his arm to direct a dripping brush, Feldman worked by letting materials work on him.

From Feldman’s reflections and artistic processes, I’d venture to extrapolate the general idea that aesthetic practice consists of human–nonhuman assemblages impacting one another affectively, physically, and creatively. This idea echoes Jane Bennett’s vital materialist theory in which any “source of effects is ... always an ontologically diverse assemblage of

energies and bodies” acting on each other “in competition and confederation.”⁹ Can we say the same of aesthetic experience?

When I listen to Feldman’s music, I feel that I can’t help but become aware of the bodies at work: sounds, humans, wooden things that scrape against themselves or mangle the air coming out of someone’s lungs. It’s a tense experience. If I listen to a recording of *Palais de Mari* or *The Turfan Fragments* while reading along with Feldman’s score, the experience is almost stressful even though it is beautiful: an edge-of-my-seat feeling. I wait for the piano to refuse to emit any sound at all when Feldman calls for a six-note chord *ppp*. I wait for a sound to stumble from a trumpet too late, too loud, and fuzzily: the trumpeter struggling to squeeze air into the brass in a manner that befits Feldman’s four notated *p*’s. This experience, which I call the experience of Feldman’s music, is actually his pen touching paper pressuring a player’s mind and lips and shoulders touching her instrument touching the air touching my body in a collective, mutually affective impact. By calling for extreme levels of quiet, Feldman asks instruments and players to exert themselves in order to restrain themselves in ways that far exceed their habitual levels of comfort, thereby calling attention to their specific material bodies and capabilities. We might say that Feldman calls attention to the general idea that aesthetic experience, like aesthetic practice, constitutes the mutual affecting of human–nonhuman assemblages.

It’s tempting to argue that Feldman is an extreme case. His music is extreme: listening to his second string quartet, one must strain to hear the barely audible for six hours. His perspective is far from typical for a composer. But what about a more familiar aesthetic experience? The experience of reading a letter in Diane Setterfield’s novel, *The Thirteenth Tale*, is also one of human–nonhuman assemblages.

I opened the letter and pulled out a sheaf of half a dozen pages, all written in the same laborious script. Thanks to my work, I am experienced in the reading of difficult manuscripts. There is no great secret to it. Patience and practice are all that is required ... your eye needs to study not just the shape of the letters but other marks of production. The speed of the pen. The pressure of the hand on the page ... Until you wake into a dream where you are at once a pen flying over vellum and the vellum itself with the touch of ink tickling your surface. Then you can read it. The intention of the writer, his thoughts, his hesitations, his longings and his meaning. You can read as clearly as if you were the very candlelight illuminating the page as the pen speeds over it.¹⁰

Setterfield isn't talking about extreme cases: Margaret, the narrator, is not reading a weather- and time-beaten manuscript but an ordinary letter composed just the other day on ordinary paper, placed in a fresh envelope, and delivered by the usual postman. Margaret's point is that her work with extreme cases helped her to identify what goes on in ordinary experiences of reading. This experience is in fact very strange: a communion between reader, paper, ink, light, and writer that involves mutually affective tickling, desiring, imagining, and becoming, even trading places. In that sense, the aesthetic experience of reading resembles that of Feldman's music: both experiences consist of human-nonhuman bodies mutually affecting one another as components of equally affective assemblages.

The idiosyncratic features of page-bound nonhumans – hand-drawn characters – even seem to bring the physical bodies of reader and writer into contact with one another. In the shapes of the markings, Margaret seems to discern the qualities of the human body that produced them:

The crisp-cornered envelope, puffed up with its thickly folded contents, was addressed in a hand that must have given the postman a certain amount of trouble. Although the style of the writing was old-fashioned, with its heavily embellished capitals and curly flourishes, my first impression was that it had been written by a child. The letters seemed untrained. Their uneven strokes either faded into nothing or were heavily etched into the paper. There was no sense of flow in the letters ... That is when I thought, It is the hand of an invalid.¹¹

But as it turns out, the letters hoodwink Margaret. The author of the letter is not a child, and the irregularities in the handwriting are not due to any illness. Rather the markings defy interpretation, and they are irreducible to their human author's capabilities and intentions.

Any "source of effects is ... always an ontologically diverse assemblage of energies and bodies" acting on each other "in competition and confederation." Jane Bennett's theory seems to sum up both aesthetic practice and aesthetic experience, at least according to my brief examples. In turn, these examples suggest that even without being specifically "vital materialist aesthetics," aesthetic practices, experiences, and reflections

may engage the de-anthropocentric perspectives and relations which Bennett hopes to cultivate. In her indispensable book *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett's project is to think through what ontological, political, and ecological questions would look like if humans could admit that matter and nonhuman things are living, creative agents. The purpose of the Feldman and Setterfield examples is to begin to wonder what aesthetic questions would look like.

The driving principle of Bennett's vital materialism is that matter, materials, and things are not "passive stuff ... raw, brute, or inert," but rather vital actants.¹² The "vitality" of things is "the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own."¹³ "Actant" is Bruno Latour's term which, adopted by Bennett, connotes "a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events."¹⁴ All things are actants: all things produce effects on other things.

The effects of things are not just the effects of things on humans or humans' effects on things. As Bennett puts it, *things* are not merely *objects*. Objects are things *as they appear for humans*, but things are "vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them"; things are "never entirely exhausted by their semiotics."¹⁵ Each thing is more in itself than what it is for us. What Bennett calls *thing-power* is a "call" issued by a thing, calling attention to its singular existence for itself in excess of its relevance to humans.¹⁶ Thing-power is also a thing's way of calling attention to the fact that it exists within a diverse, contingent, mutually affective assemblage of other things. In Setterfield's example, the thing-power of a written word on vellum calls attention to the pen with which it was written, which calls attention to the vellum which calls attention to the ink which has a certain feeling to the fingers, and that feeling invites the reader to dream of the writer's dreams. Even the semiotic associations that I draw in my head when I encounter a thing are instances of the thing's thing-power.¹⁷ The thing-power of a thing is its inherent ability to dramatically and subtly affect others simply by being itself.

Vital materialism considers things in terms of what they do (their vivid thing-powers and varied affects), not how they appear (for it is all too easy to think that still things like vellum are nothing more than still). In

Bennett's ontology, to be a thing is to have thing-power. Being material *means* having the ability to produce effects: "I equate affect with materiality," Bennett writes.¹⁸

At the same time, being material means having a certain recalcitrance. "Recalcitrance" has two meanings in vital materialism. A thing's recalcitrance is its "'active impulsion' or trending tendency to persist"; it is a thing's active insistence on integrity, on remaining itself.¹⁹ This sense of "recalcitrance" derives from Spinoza's term "*conatus*," which Bennett thinks through in depth. The second meaning of "recalcitrance" has more to share with Thoreau's idea of uncanny Wildness: a thing's recalcitrance is its resistance to human understanding, conceptualization, or control; the irreducible strangeness of even the most ordinary thing.²⁰ What is at stake here is not an epistemological limit. The idea is not that all things bare themselves to us although our minds are too limited to process all there is to take in. Rather, in the Wild-like form of recalcitrance, Bennett identifies an ontological moment in which things refuse to bare themselves to us, presenting only partial views of themselves to human consciousness. In that sense, recalcitrance is the formative "moment of independence (from subjectivity) possessed by things."²¹

Each thing that comes before me constantly alternates between disclosing itself to my consciousness as something in which I may find utility or meaning ("raw material") and something wild that stuns me with its inconceivable uniqueness so that I am too enchanted to do anything more than enjoy its presence ("thing-power"). Each thing is not just vibrant but "vibratory": its singularity is in fact multiplicity.²² Each thing is "ontologically multiple."²³

Bennett describes how each thing, each body, is actually a mosaic-like assemblage of other bodies. My body is the assemblage of my organs, bones, cells, nerves – yet a kidney by itself is not human: a human body is an assemblage of nonhuman things. The same goes for Setterfield's letter and Feldman's compositions, each of which are assemblages comprising human and nonhuman bodies. This means that in order to be itself – "recalcitrant" (Spinozan definition) – a thing must interact with other things. Like any effective ability, the ability to be oneself is "distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a [single] human [or nonhuman] body."²⁴

But when things interact, they modify one another. I eat a burger and fries: I turn it into my tissue; it changes me by making my body physically larger. Thus if a thing is to remain itself, it must constantly invent new ways of interacting with other things so that it does not always – only sometimes – yield to the modifications on which other things insist. The work of being oneself is therefore not just a matter of one's *own* survival but also of balancing the competing interests of other things without which one could not survive. To "face up to the compound nature of the human self" or anything at all, including a nonhuman thing or assemblage of things "is to find it difficult even to make sense of the notion of a single end-in-itself. What instead appears is a swarm of competing ends being pursued simultaneously in each individual, some of which are healthy to the whole, some of which are not."²⁵

In vital materialism, things and phenomena are thus contingent, heterogeneous assemblages in Deleuze and Guattari's sense:

Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within ... Assemblages are not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group ... The elements of the assemblage work together ... [yet] its jelling endures alongside energies and factions that fly out from it and disturb it from within.²⁶

Things act on one another within assemblages. Assemblages act on other assemblages. The affective power of individual things spans, invades, and creates assemblages. The 'cause' of any particular action or effect is therefore never just a single thing. For example, Bennett analyzes the massive electrical blackout that gripped the United States in 2003 and the so-called 'epidemic' of obesity in twenty-first-century America as the results of decisions and actions by both humans and nonhumans.²⁷ These examples challenge Bennett's readers to "acknowledge the distributive quality of agency to address the power of human-nonhuman assemblages and to resist a politics of blame."²⁸ She has an ecological goal as well: vital materialism aims "to disrupt the political parsing that yields only active ([often] American [and] manly) subjects and passive objects ... [in part] because the frame of subjects and objects is unfriendly to the intensified

ecological awareness that we need if we are to respond intelligently to signs of the breakdown of the earth's carrying capacity for human life."²⁹

In general, Bennett's target is human hubris: the anthropocentrism that tends to dominate many levels of thinking. As she observes in a more recent article, vital materialism and object-oriented ontology (OOO) share the same enemy.³⁰ Both radical ontologies take aim at the anthropocentric bull's-eye with the argument that ontologically and effectively, nonhumans are no different from humans. In fact, OOO and vital materialism seem to share several basic tenets. Both perspectives equate being with effectivity. In the words of Graham Harman, OOO's pioneer, to be is to be "*capable of an effect, of inflicting some kind of blow on reality.*"³¹ OOO also champions the recalcitrance of things: even the most familiar entities are irreducible to human concepts and purposes. Hence in both OOO and vital materialism, each thing is divided from itself. But the theories differ in their conceptions of how a thing divides. In OOO (which unlike vital materialism uses the words "thing" and "object" interchangeably), "an object ... consists precisely of a rift between its appearance and its essence."³² According to vital materialism, a single thing consists of multiple *other* things.

Moreover, unlike vital materialism, Harman takes the idea of recalcitrance a step further. In OOO, things not only evade *human* access and understanding but also conceal what they are in themselves from *every* other thing with which they come into contact. I cannot see both the top and the underside of my desk at the same time – but neither can my laptop, my notebook, or my teacup touch the top and underside of the desk at the same time. According to OOO, in every relation or interaction, a thing bares only part of itself (its appearance-for other things) and conceals the rest. What the thing is in itself (its essence) is always concealed or withdrawn from others. As Harman puts it, every thing "withdraws into its vast inner reality, which is irreducible to any of its negotiations with the world. Only in its relations with other entities is it caricatured, turned into a unitary profile."³³ In OOO, withdrawn, individual entities are ontologically prior to their relations. But in vital materialism, entities consist precisely of other entities and relations therewith; so relations are just as ontologically primary as things.

The question of the ontological priority of entities or relations may have countless implications that exceed ontology, some of which would doubtlessly impact aesthetic thinking. But an editorial cannot argue those implications. My purpose is rather to raise questions that may challenge

our readers to engage with vital materialism beyond the present publication.

What would aesthetic reflection in a specifically vital materialistic vein consist of? Hopefully my discussion so far intimates a few characteristics. Aesthetic practices, products, experiences, and reflections already encourage attentive, respectful, imaginative, playful, and reflective sensory engagement with human and nonhuman things – simply by virtue of being aesthetic. Aesthetic reflection already entails an enchantment with things like paintings, texts, and beautiful furniture. Aesthetic analysis already acknowledges that each aesthetic experience is contingent: it's different for each person every time, and no single experience of an object, e.g., a Sibelius symphony, ever yields the entire object. So even traditional aesthetics are aware of what Bennett calls thing–power and the recalcitrance of things. However, only vital materialism explicitly identifies thing–power and recalcitrance as ontological characteristics.

Hence specifically vital materialist aesthetics would recognize thing–power and recalcitrance as essential modes of being. This recognition could lead aestheticians to see their traditional ways of thinking in new light. It could encourage deeper thinking about the peculiar ontology of aesthetic objects and how they relate to other things. It may therefore complicate the relationship between aesthetics and ontology and other branches of philosophy. Vital materialist aesthetics would also question and debate the ontological and aesthetic priority of entities and/or relations and analyze the aesthetic and extra–aesthetic implications thereof. Vital materialist aesthetics would acknowledge that aesthetic practices and experiences are affective human–nonhuman assemblages – and not just recognize the fact but enjoy it, delve into it, explore the recalcitrant things and contingent relations that comprise these assemblages.

Drawing on Bennett's own scholarly and philosophical methods, aesthetic analysts and theorists might tweak our habitual perspectives in ways that attune our thinking to the distributed agencies at play in human–nonhuman assemblages. Along with "a cultivated, patient, sensory attentiveness to nonhuman forces," Bennett advocates a deliberately "countercultural kind of perceiving": a thoughtful form of attentiveness that deliberately refuses anthropocentrism and refuses to reduce events or phenomena *solely* to exercises in human agency, meaning, or social context.³⁴ The demystifying perspective of critique – though it is crucial to the understanding of human intention, hubris, and ideology – is insufficient

where nonhuman assemblages are also at stake. In addition, therefore, Bennett calls for “a bit of anthropomorphism – the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature.”³⁵ By “revealing similarities across categorical divides and lighting up structural parallels between material forms,” she writes, “a touch of anthropomorphism ... can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations.”³⁶

In the following pages, some of our contributors engage Bennett’s work directly. **Eric Lubarsky**, for example, analyzes the singular musical performances of Frances Pelton–Jones as assemblages of vital materials. However, even in contributions wherein authors adopt contrasting points of view, I hear echoes (sometimes faint, sometimes less so) of one of Bennett’s most basic concerns: humans tend to understand our relations with the world in dangerously narrow, self–centered ways. It’s my sense that even outside of vital materialism, this concern may have begun to permeate current aesthetic thinking. The authors of the ensuing articles share a commitment to questioning basic elements of human aesthetic experience, including time, bodily movement, conceptualization, and pleasure. In reflections on the incommensurability of lived and narrated time and between text and interpretation in *Tristram Shandy*, **Adam Schipper** finds that the “impossible movement towards complete conceptualization is precisely where one finds the pleasure of reading.”³⁷ Via Nelson Goodman, **Joshua Hall** confronts the difficulties involved in attempting to reduce aesthetic human gesturing – dance – to linguistic or textual symbols. And in a new reading of Kant, **Ryan Johnson** demonstrates the general irreducibility of aesthetic objects and experiences to human knowledge – a realization that compels him to rethink the relationship between pleasure and aesthetic judgment as well as the structure of Kantian beauty. Whilst in most cases these authors do not explicitly champion de–anthropocentric points of view, it is evident in their thinking that events and entities – even when they are instigated by our own bodies – may exceed our conceptions of them. In fact, **Jane Bennett’s** contemplation of damaged art pieces leads her to wonder if artworks may possess a form of life all their own. Even if they do not fit the usual definitions of biological life, the fact that in their own ways, art objects *strive* – working towards and producing effects – suggests the existence of multiple kinds or registers of liveliness that exceed biology.

It is this journal’s privilege to host Professor Bennett’s new article, “Encounters with an Art–Thing.” When we editors voiced our idea of

dedicating the tenth issue of *Evental Aesthetics* to vital materialism and related aesthetic concerns, Professor Bennett responded with gracious enthusiasm. This publication barely skims the surface of the ocean of questioning to which the dynamic river of vital materialism leads. But I hope this issue will inspire far more thinking – especially in this and other aesthetic venues – about the vibrancy of things. The editors of EA dedicate this issue to Jane Bennett as a small offering of thanks for her work with the journal, her appreciation for independent scholarship, and her unique contributions to philosophical thought.

• Notes •

- 1 Morton Feldman, *Give My Regards to Eighth Street*, ed. B.H. Friedman (Cambridge: Exact Change, 2000), 157-8.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 160.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 159.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 62. See also 162-3.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 192.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 157.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 183-4.
- 9 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 117, 32.
- 10 Diane Setterfield, *The Thirteenth Tale* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2006), 4.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 3-4.
- 12 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, vii.
- 13 *Ibid.*, viii.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*, 5.

- 16 Ibid., 4.
- 17 See Ibid., 10.
- 18 Ibid., xiii.
- 19 Ibid., 2.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid., 3.
- 22 Ibid., 5.
- 23 Ibid., 8.
- 24 Ibid., 23.
- 25 Ibid., 12.
- 26 Ibid., 23-24.
- 27 Ibid., chapters 2 and 3.
- 28 Ibid., 38.
- 29 Bennett, "Systems and Things: A Response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton," *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 231.
- 30 Ibid., 230.
- 31 Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 20. Emphasis original.
- 32 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 168.
- 33 Harman, *Tool-Being*, 169.
- 34 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xiv.
- 35 Ibid., xvi.
- 36 Ibid., 99.
- 37 Adam Schipper, "The Pleasure of Reading: Playing Games with Time in *Tristram Shandy*," *Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 3 (2015): 25.

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