

A MATTER OF NON-MATTER: AN EDITORIAL

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When the Diffractions' editorial team first invited us to come up with a proposal to guest-edit this issue we realised we were both experiencing a state of disorientation. Overwhelmed by discourse, in a constant attempt to keep our research up to date. Overwhelmed by the 'arts', objects to look at, exhibitions to attend, and narratives to discuss. We quickly agreed to allow the platform we were given to echo approaches and practices showcasing traces of immaterial and ephemeral endeavours. This issue of Diffractions explores immateriality in artistic and cultural practices as a form of individual and collective expression, of both violence and resistance.

For centuries, the histories of artistic practices (as well as historiographies and historicities) have been anchored to materiality and the production and accumulation (whether legit or not) of objects. As Michel Claura argues, “[t]he history of art is the history of the technique of art” (1969, 83). Indeed, curatorship as we know it today initially developed around objects and their need for care. However, practices have constantly been questioning and deconstructing the need to be linked to objects and their production, shifting the focus from physical artworks to their assigned concepts and intentions. Examples span from

performances and happenings to participatory and socially engaged artistic movements, such as Nicolas Bourriaud's well-known relational aesthetics (2002). While artistic production has challenged the dogmatic and energy-intensive authority of materiality and its exhibition and conservation (from private collections to national archives, among many others), cultural institutions and political bodies (and the so-called Western ones in particular) have only recently started to value the immaterial artistic expressions of individuals and communities, most often still perpetuating profit-oriented ambitions.

It is the case of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which is still today a source of discussion for its polarising nature and limitations (Van Damme and Jacobs 2022). A very discussed case related to it is the 2010 inscription of the Mediterranean Diet in the UNESCO Convention, which comprises as geographically and culturally different cuisines as the Cypriot, Italian, and Portuguese culinary traditions. Soon after the inscription, it emerged that the description of the Mediterranean Diet proved itself to be complex and almost impossible (Ferro-Luzzi and Sette 1989), while “[r]ecent investigations of the dietary patterns and health status of the countries surrounding the Mediterranean basin clearly indicate major differences among them in both dietary intake and health status” and therefore “the term ‘Mediterranean diet’ is a misnomer” (Simopoulos 2001, 3065). To fit the limits of the Convention, the inscribed object ended up being broad and even generic, as a result of the absence of a specific domain of culinary heritage and the significant territorial differences between the co-signatory countries.

Described by Brandt as the art of “picking up an object and displaying it, or even of merely declaring the intention to do so” (2004, 210), Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades (but also Isamu Noguchi's practice of rock placement, for instance) are commonly addressed as a first example of physical and technical abstraction. Despite the Western-centric idea that Duchamp's conceptual turn caused an unprecedented shift in the art world by allowing intentional acts to be technically considered art, immaterial forms of artistic practices, as well as knowledge production, have long existed in multiple cultures over millennia. Not only has the dematerialisation of art been explored in different periods and geographies as a way of criticising art systems and challenging institutional structures (Osborne 2018; Ramírez 1993; Stimson 1999), but certain communities and cultures have rarely or

even never resorted to physical media, favouring, for instance, orality over the use of writing.

On this subject, in her book *Immaterial Archives: An African Diaspora Poetics of Loss* comparative literature scholar Jenny Sharpe addresses “the paucity of documentary evidence concerning the lives of people who were immaterial to the archiving process, but not by treating contemporary art and literature as an alternative archive” (2020, 3). Here, she continues, immaterial “refers to the intangible quality of affects, dreams, spirits, and visions that art and literature introduce into material archives” and, in particular, “to the degraded status of African-derived knowledge, languages, and cultures within colonial archives, as well as the diminished status of the humanities in an information-based society today” (2020, 4). If these phenomena are made up of visions, affects, mythologies, dreams and even silence (and much more), Sharpe asks, are they something or nothing? Do they have substance even though they have a different relationship to traditional Western archival practices and written records?

The link between materiality and extractivist colonialism first and accumulative capitalism later is not new. As sociologist Rolando Vázquez writes, the objectification of the world is needed to be able to conquer it (2020). This economic interest and value-based attitude towards materiality traces back to the Enlightenment rational belief that the natural world subsists only as an instrument for human ambition. In this sense, modernity and modern, Western, and scientific thought have been particularly successful because of their uncomplicated depictions of nature, culture, and related ecologies. This approach makes them easy to conceive, portray, and control, shaping a time in which “a new, forward-looking world view and a new set of social expectations” (Kaika 2005, 12) exist. Following the Cartesian dichotomy separating the human mind from the physical body and, thus, from all material entities, technological progress directly associates materiality with use and, ultimately, profit. While conquering seems to be progressively problematised and questioned (although not fully or consistently) experts – almost only Western, white, and male – have appointed science and culture as ‘world heritage’ and made themselves responsible for their protection: “[t]he era of conquest is over. Management is the current fetish” (Sawyer and Agrawal 2000, 89).

In their article “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter”, Karen Barad challenges this anthropocentric separation arguing that “[w]e are not outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply located at particular places in the world; rather, we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity” (2003, 828). The idea that humans are outside nature is addressed by Anna Grear as a contributing factor to the “climate and environmental fallouts; the fundamentally colonial capitalist imperatives driving the continuing structural dominance of the fossil-fuel economy; extensive, and continuing, corporate enclosures in the Global South; and the pervasive and expanding commodification and technification of ‘nature’” (2020, 338). In the context of the fast-paced logic of industrial and cultural production (Bouteloup 2020) based on practices of human and non-human exploitation, how should we question the historically dominant focus on materiality in artistic and cultural practices today?

This issue of *Diffractions* fits into a discussion about how multiple perspectives and fields of research and action on the tensions between materiality and immateriality have blurred the boundaries between binary conceptions such as human-nature, and subject-object to acknowledge alternative narratives, existences, and temporalities (Bellacasa 2017; Krasny 2022; Vásquez 2020). It intends to challenge materialist theories and reflect on the importance of non-material approaches on being and becoming, what Elizabeth Grosz coined as the “incorporeal” (2017), our ethical and political existences and the relationships between humans and other living beings. We believe that new materialities and immaterialities are particularly significant in their attempts to question and eventually overcome anthropocentrism, but also in the celebration of listening practices and oral traditions through the recognition of knowledge across “more than human materialities and existences” (Bellacasa 2017, 221).

The issue spans a wide variety of themes and approaches that complement and at times oppose one other. In the first article, Emily Shoyer explores the work of artists Owanto and Mary Sibande and how their multi-media installations depict ancestors as more-than-human avatars entangled with plants and critters. The author shows how immaterial epistemologies of multi-species relationships and care challenge Western understandings of time, space, and animacy. A theme echoed by Anna Köhler in her article “Embodied Memorial Practices as Resistance: Fighting against Indigenous Erasure in US-American National Parks”, where she discusses

how national parks in the United States, framed within narratives of ‘untouched’ wilderness, perpetuate acts of colonial violence while erasing the long history of Native presence. Through the lens of cultural memory studies, she approaches the tensions between materiality as a set of techniques of repression and Native immaterial practices of remembrance and occupation.

Raha Golestani and Konstantin Schönfelder in the third article look at the Sufi practice of Sama (سماع) as a ritual combining listening practices with (in)corporeal movements and a desire for a state of trance, described by the authors as “a brief encounter with immateriality”. Capturing particular attention in postwar Germany, Sama is examined by looking at its formal, conceptual, and methodological correspondence with the body of work of artist Günther Uecker and the ZERO avant-garde group. Later, Lea Ramaswamy discusses Futurist cuisine, featured in works produced by the Italian Futurist avant-garde between 1930 and 1932, overcoming the visual, physical, and textual (and overall material) approaches these publications have been dominantly addressed with. In turn, she discusses the immaterial dimension of Futurist cuisine and its entanglement with fascist policies (economic, agricultural, commercial, ...), warfare, and colonialism. The immaterial dimension of books is also discussed by Teresa Weinholtz, who in her article addresses the incorporation of digital technologies in artistic practices, specifically focusing on the artist’s book *Mixed Signals* (2023) by Kennedy+Swan, which merges the conventional codex of the book with the digital. Weinholtz argues that using these technologies expands the book’s narrative and artistic expression between the material and immaterial.

The last two contributions combine research, artistic practices, and personal accounts. Moss Berke reflects on her land art practice and the immaterial encounters between (human) artist and more-than-human collaborators. The article adopts Karen Barad’s idea of the ‘apparatus’ to reimagine collaborative methods for land art as immaterial performance rather than an object-based practice. Last, Elisa Marchesini, guest artist of this *Diffractions*’ issue, shares an extract from *Back to the real life*, the final project of her MA in photography (ISIA Urbino, recently published by Corraini Edizioni), a visual and exploratory quest inside a cruise ship. Deconstructing and recontextualising the experience of travelling aboard a cruise ship, Marchesini looks at (and photographs) the vessel as a ‘performance machine’,

an experiment for the creation of a perfect, parallel, floating world, but also the summary of values and aspirations of the consumerist contemporary society.

This issue was a collective effort born from different voices, practices, and sensibilities. We hope the reader finds it as enriching as we do, and that it arouses new questions and stimulates the curiosity to pursue further research endeavours.

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