



THE MATTER OF OBJECTS & MATERIALITY

KATH FRIES
ALIA PARKER
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A MATERIAL WORLD: ART & THE ECOLOGY OF THINGS

The Matter of Objects and Materiality orchestrates encounters with material and object centric movements through the medium of art. Juxtaposing adaptations of new materialism with object oriented ontology, the exhibition investigates the tenability of these theoretical positions for contemporary art and the gallery experience. Beyond the interactions of theory and practice, the assembly of artworks poses a greater question – the role of art in fostering material literacy of the world we inhabit.

In the late twentieth century, a material turn swept across social sciences and humanities, emerging as a response to poststructuralism's crises of representation. Shifting from a human-centric and linguistic framework of cultural analysis, social production is emphasized over social construction, enabled by a myriad of material forces "from the physical and the biological to the psychological, social and cultural."¹ New Materialism, as this contemporary perspective of our world is known, is open and highly plural, evolving on different fronts and via various disciplines from architecture, visual arts and anthropology to biopolitics, international relations and political theory. The strand of New Materialism in focus for this project, subscribes to the notion that matter is lively and dynamic, that it possesses its own energies and means of transformation, rather than an inert entity that is acted upon. Differing from historical materialism, which operates in vertical hierarchies of fixed closed systems, determinism and causality, New Materialism embraces a flat ontology, in which the distinction between subject/object, nature/culture, animate/inanimate are collapsed. It places a strong emphasis on relationality and shifting associations between matter, with a focus on process and becoming, in favour of state and being. In other words, they promote a democracy of horizontal flows, constant flux, transitions and indeterminate assemblages.² What constitutes materiality is vast, ranging from "human bodies, other animate organisms, material things, inanimate objects to spaces, places and the natural and built environment that these contain, as well as material forces including gravity and time."³

Like New Materialism, Object-Oriented Ontology similarly rejects human subjectivity and anthropocentrism. Objects refer to anything that is real or unreal, natural or artificial, animate or inanimate, human or non-human. Harman, the main proponent of this school of thinking, proposes to use "object" "in the broadest possible sense to designate anything with some sort of unitary reality."⁴ Although often lumped together with other post human thought, Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) departs sharply from New Materialism (NM) in its objection to vitalist and relationist concepts of matter. Contingencies and change have no place in OOO for it emphasizes the true essence of objects, rooted in notions of permanence and stability. Objects from an OOO objective are not only autonomous but are withdrawn, inaccessible and cannot be known in its entirety. OOO is fundamentally a (speculative) realism where things exist in and of themselves, independent of other things though objects do relate to each other. Eschewing ethics and politics, an aesthetic approach towards metaphysics is adopted instead. "OOO considers art not as decoration, but as the fundamental operation of cause and effect. To make an artwork is to interfere directly with the realm of causes and effects."⁵ Hence, OOO espouses the thingness of things and the individuality of the objects in its unique depth but stops short of any analysis of what lies behind it.

In contrast, New Materialism lends itself to the critical examination of how ethics, ontology and epistemology are connected via matter. New Materialism's repositioning of the human in collaborative terms with non-human actants through a focus on the material provide the means of directing critical

attention to the negative impact wrought by humans on the biophysical environment. Engaging with materiality and bodies offers the opportunity of resistance against dominant models of power.

It is in this context that *The Matter of Objects & Materiality* is situated. The exhibition sets out to discuss the prominence of the material and the object in several ways. At a theoretical level, it examines how artists in the show interpret, apply and advance New Materialism through their practice. A probing of New Materialism and Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) is set up through the juxtaposition of art responding to these theories. Curatorially, the question of what OOO could look like as an exhibition is posed. At an everyday level, it highlights how art can help engender an understanding of the material world.

Kath Fries' material-led practice is a visualization of New Materialism in motion. Form and meaning of her works are shaped by the material of choice. She enacts situations where viewers interact and intra-act with site-responsive beeswax structures, producing relational embodied experiences. In her creative exchanges with beeswax, Kath teases out interconnecting factors to highlight the impact of human action on insect habitat and habitat loss.

Alia Parker perceives her work as an equal partnership with the animate but non-human agent, mushroom mycelium. Collaborating with the fungi, she (co)creates speculative textile forms to address the twin needs of care of human bodies and the material objects and the urgency to reduce environmentally harmful textile waste.

Kate Brown's performative work and installation foregrounds the object and has associations with OOO. Interested in how the body produces sound, she sets up an arrangement where the body (human) object and the installation (seat belt webbing) object come together and interact at specific times. This creates a push and pull effect between the two objects and between the art-object and the viewer/human-object, described by OOO philosopher Tim Morton as "charisma". By introducing Participation Mystique however, the tension between both ideologies is mirrored in Kate's work by an interaction between the body-object and the installation object.

If viewed through the lens of New Materialism, the conglomeration of artworks are all relational and its interaction and intra-action with the viewer, in a constant state of change. From an Object-Oriented Ontological perspective, the artworks exist and interact with each other and with us, in spite of us, in all their mysterious, unfathomable glory.

What is the pertinence of the material, outside of the spheres of New Materialist and Object-Oriented Ontology? The relevance is in the potential of art, and this exhibition, to re-sensitize and re-orientate us to the material make-up of our world, to appreciate the basic material components of the things we consume everyday and to reflect on the impact of our actions on social and natural ecologies.

RACHAEL KIANG
CURATOR

1 N.J. Fox and N. Besnier, 'New Materialism,' *The Sage Encyclopedia of Research Methods*, 2008.

2 D. Coole, 'New Materialism: The Ontology and Politics of Materialisation', in S. Witzgail and K. Stakemeier, *Power of Material/Politics of Materiality*, *Diaphanes*, 2018, pp. 27-41.

3 N.J. Fox and N. Besnier, 'New Materialism,' *The Sage Encyclopedia of Research Methods*, 2008.

4 T. Lemke, 'Materialism without matter: the recurrence of subjectivism in object-oriented ontology,' *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2017, p. 133-152

5 Morton, T. (2015). *Charisma and Causality* by Timothy Morton / *ArtReview*. [online] *Artreview.com*. Available at: https://artreview.com/features/november_2015_feature_timothy_morton_charisma_causality/

THE MATTER OF OBJECTS & MATERIALITY

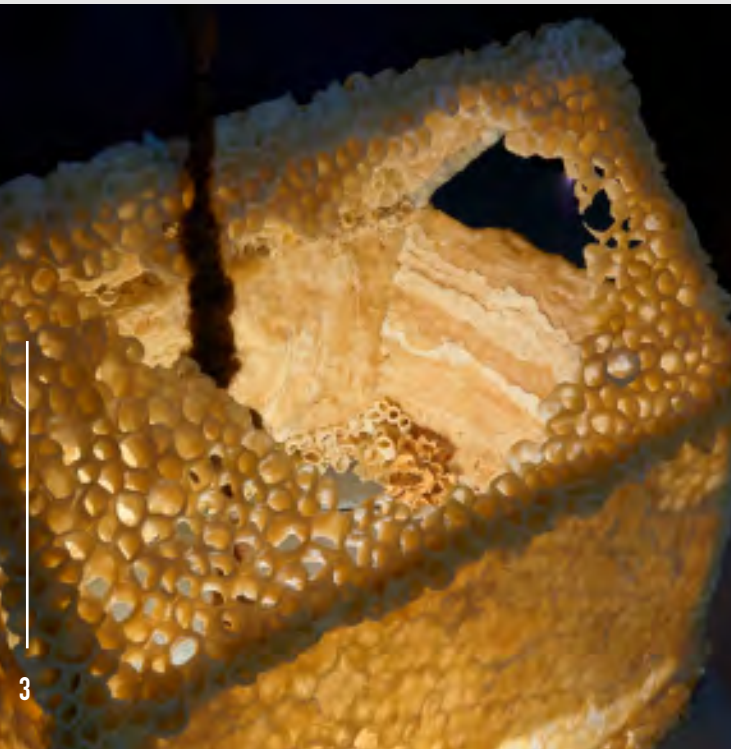
My practice explores how our senses connect us to the interdependent complexities of our surroundings. I work with tactile organic materials to evoke direct empathetic and palpable experiences of present time, fluctuation and interconnection. Over several years I've been working with beeswax, enchanted by its viscosity and fragrant luminosity. I've also been learning about bees, from their super-organism complex dynamics, to how they have co-evolved with plants and current trepidation about Colony Collapse Disorder. Globally the impact of climate change, pesticide use and habitat loss are devastating all insect species, not just bees. Recent studies show that there are 75% less insects in the biomass than were thirty years ago. This catastrophe has been termed the Insect Armageddon and it will have devastating consequences for all life on Earth, including humans.

// KATH FRIES //

For me, working with beeswax involves responding to these extensively interconnecting factors that contribute to insect habitat and habitat loss. The material of beeswax engages our senses of touch, smell and sight, which become multisensory encounters inviting a different felt relationship with insects and the interdependent complexities of our surroundings; challenging our human habits of thinking we can be disconnected from the world.

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IMAGE: (LEFT) Kath Fries, *Abode*, 2018, beeswax, wire, found object and light, photo by Ellen Dahl **(RIGHT)** Kath Fries, *Abode* (detail), 2018, beeswax, wire, found object, light, photo by Ellen Dahl.



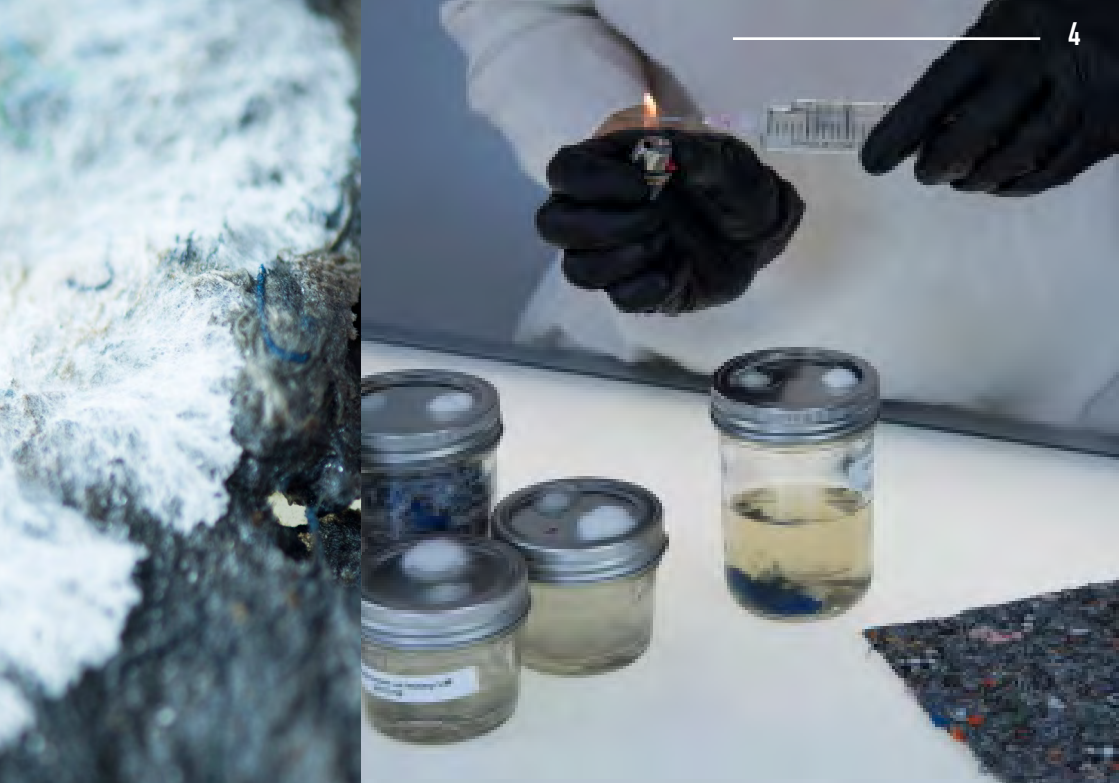


IMAGE: (LEFT) Alia Parker, *Mycelial Un/making*, 2019, mushroom growing on textile (RIGHT) Alia Parker, *Process Image*, 2019.

A persistent concern that guides Parker's practice is the belief that there is a lack of enduring care between human bodies and the material objects that house them. This absence of care often results in the production of vast quantities of textile waste with a devastating impact on both human and non-human ecologies. Philosophical frameworks such as New Materialism however, provide a window to thinking through more-than-human worlds, as both a reordering of ontological planes, but also as a way to bring care as an affective, ethical and practical force into being.

The forms, surfaces and liquids exhibited, are in various states of being made and unmade by a Tasmanian strain of Reishi mushroom mycelium (the white microscopic filaments of a mushroom similar to the roots of a tree and often hidden underground) as it grows in and through surplus textiles. These experimental and speculative forms are diagrams of possibility, they do not propose solutions but rather are open-ended and processual assemblages. This lively collaboration between the artist and fungi, the ability to affect and to be affected by each other's actions and modes of being is significant in rethinking our relationship to materials as inert and disposable.

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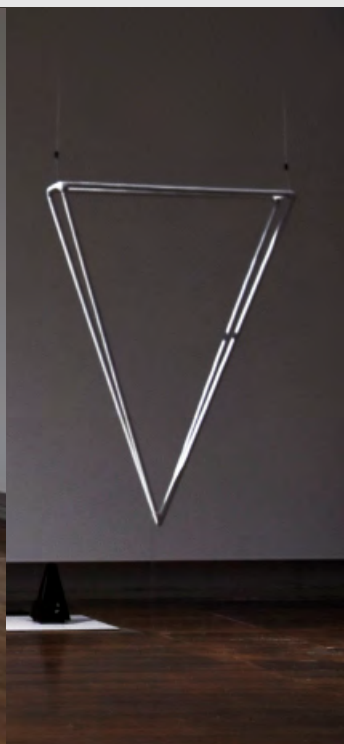
'In Azimuth' is a new vocal performance and installation work by Kate Brown. Using white seat belt webbing and seat belt buckles, she installs long stretches of the material looping across the space. The relationship between materials and the body in this performance has associations with form and function, Participation Mystique and Object Oriented Ontology. Participation Mystique sees a body/object as psychological and relational whereas OOO rejects this idea and places an object into an independent realm of perception, removed from the body. This confusion in interaction

between Participation Mystique and OOO and the body/object is the premise of this work. This is also seen in the title and arrangement of objects, 'Azimuth' meaning the direction of a celestial object from the observer, expressed as the angular distance from the north or south point of the horizon to the point at which a vertical circle passing through the object intersects the horizon.

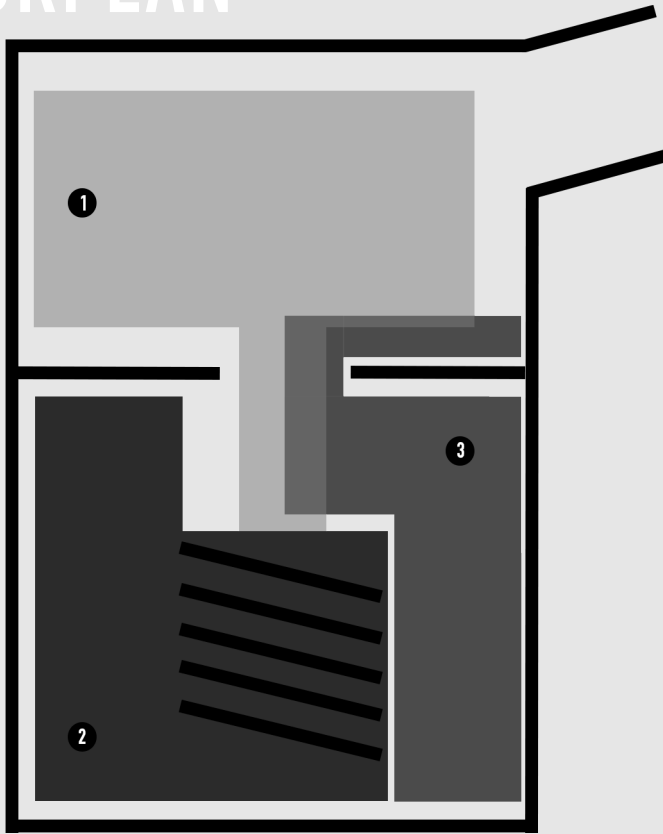
'In Azimuth' distorts ideologies surrounding objects by creating new images, relational approaches and the removal of them through movement, sound and placing the audience into an otherworldly environment.

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IMAGE: (LEFT & RIGHT) Kate Brown, *Currents of Exchange*, 2018, sound installation and vocal performance, dimensions variable, Kudos Gallery, Paddington, photo by Kieran Butler **(MIDDLE)** Kate Brown, *Currents of Exchange*, 2018, Installed at Kudos Gallery, Paddington, photo by Nicholas Aloisio-Shear.



EXHIBITION FLOORPLAN



- ❶ Kate Brown, *In Azimuth*, 2019, installation and vocal performance, dimensions variable
- ❷ Kath Fries, *Abode (fragile)*, 2019, beeswax, charcoal, paper, prefab greenhouse structure, wood and neon flex led light, 200 x 150 x 80 cm
- Kath Fries, *Abode (collapse)*, 2017-2019, beeswax, found structure, wire, wood and neon flex led light, 98 x 98 x 72 cm
- Kath Fries, *Cluster*, 2017-2019, beeswax and led lights, dimensions variable
- Kath Fries, *Clamber*, 2019, beeswax, paper, neon flex led light and false walls, dimensions variable

- ❸ Alia Parker, *Planes (Study 1)*, 2019, cotton, 30x20cm
- Alia Parker, *Planes (Study 2-6)*, 2019, mushroom mycelium/cotton, each 60x80cm
- Alia Parker, *Liquids (studies 1-48)*, augmented mason jars, water, honey, textile tea, mushroom mycelium, dimensions variable
- Alia Parker, *Forms (studies 1-3)*, silk and beeswax, cotton and mushroom mycelium, each 100x100x95cm



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