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Life of Things

Abstract

This paper stems from my Master's Dissertation and is an inquiry into the 'life' of objects/things and is written to provoke and challenge perception about things other than humans, that often are discarded, thrown away or not valued – resulting in the possibility of being buried in a landfill.

When first considering objects, or things or matter, initially it is hard to imagine thinking about it in any other way than the literal, perhaps obvious 'thereness'. Although this may be an assumption it is often accepted as common-sense philosophy.

The inquiry is a critical reflective exploration of some of the historical and contemporary perceptions/ philosophies of materialism, agency and vibrancy of matter and the question of 'do objects have life … do they have a voice … do they have power?' The research sets the scene initially by a challenge to open our minds to a holistic sensorial way of perceiving, and proceeds to move from the concept of human versus object to the concept of objects and humans equally – to 'thingyhoodness' taken from the concept of personhood but in relation to all things. It is written in a generic and hopefully objective and questioning approach.

The uniqueness of humanity is challenged through this research, particularly by looking at the research of political theorist Jane Bennett – her explorations and examinations of shared affinities with things including non-human forces and flows, etc. There is a suggestion of equality between things. Bennett highlights inter-involvements and interdependencies and suggests a political goal of vital materialism with a polity that has more channels of communication between members – therefore when or if equality happens things will not be simply discarded / there will be less waste / and maybe our world will be more friendly.

A very important note, and to bring clarification: when referring to 'things' (although often I write objects/things as a reminder) I am referring in the broadest manner to all matter, substance, objects, things, animals and humans, whether seemingly dead or alive, formed or unformed, and inclusive of forces and flows – it is a something that is, or seems to be, one thing. It will have a biased human concept and perception as written by a human – I will endeavour to be objective and maintain an equal stance with 'things', but as my language is of human origin and things do not have a voice in the same manner as I do, this creates a problem that is difficult to overcome!

Are they just there?
Do they have a life?
What is a life?
What does life mean?
Do they speak … do they speak to me?
What do they mean?
Do they speak to each other?
Do they affect each other?
Do they stay the same?
Can they change the world?
Do they make me feel?
What am I supposed to feel?
Do I feel?
What do they want?
Do they have personality?
What is personality?
What do we want?
… Thingyhoodness …

Introduction

When first considering objects, or things or matter, initially it is hard to imagine thinking about it in any other way than the literal, perhaps obvious 'thereness'. However, this often accepted common-sense philosophy is perhaps an assumption, and there are other philosophies and research about materiality to consider.

Many of our ideas about materiality originate from Descartes in the seventeenth century, which led to the model of thinking that nature is a collection of objects, quantifiable and measurable, with objects being passive and 'identifiably discreet', only moving through an encounter with an external agent. In this

calculable natural world, there are solid objects that occupy space, whose movements are predictable, controllable and replicable by humans, with humans themselves occupying space at the top of the hierarchy, making sense of their human perceived world. This was the basis for Newtonian physics and Euclidian geometry and is thinking also referred to as Cartesian and Newtonian understanding (Coole and Frost 2010). Aristotle argued that the creation of things involved the bringing together of form and matter or form being imposed on matter, and this became known as the 'Hylomorphic' model. Today, theoretical physics and the understanding of matter suggests that we cannot simply rely on classical physics anymore, and understanding matter now is perceived to be far more complex, unstable, fragile and interactive (Coole and Frost 2010).

Sensorial perceptions

In order to begin to grasp and play with the idea of perceiving matter and materialism in an alternative way, we may need to first challenge our senses to new ways of thinking and approaches.

Architect and writer Juhani Pallasmaa explores the conscious exploration and perception of human senses. He suggests that we can better understand the world if we integrate all of our senses. He makes reference to James Gibson's views of the senses as aggressively seeking mechanisms rather than passive receivers. Gibson categorises the senses into five sensory categories: visual, auditory, taste-smell, orienting and the haptic. Pallasmaa argues that if we separate our senses then we have lost a beauty – he portrays the skin-like touch and as being the oldest sense and parent sense to all other senses. Through the eyes, the body can imagine all the properties associated with the other senses, constantly creating a library of senses and understandings.

Pallasmaa wrote:

> My perception is (therefore) not a sum of visual, tactile and audible gives: I perceive in a total way with my whole being. (Pallasmaa cited in Odom 2011)

Our society has changed from an ocular-centric society to a visual-centric society. Change originated when written speech took over from oral communication, causing a shift from sound to visual space. Some scientists argue that up to 80 per cent of communication is not passed on verbally –therefore it is very necessary in design to use all phenomenological qualities for humans and objects to have a better relationship. Pallasmaa discusses a way of seeing that is 'an athletic gaze' which is all-inclusive to every sense, using vision to pull out the other senses, seeing through many standpoints and perspectives.

Our senses are complex and interwoven with each other. For example, the ear has the capacity to create visual volumes with sound and touch being able to validate the reality of something and its properties such as weight, resistance and texture. Surfaces such as a highly polished old object can cause certain emotions and be seductive to stroking, which points to an appreciation of the touch and the history that caused the polish. Here there is a concept of time in design and how a patina of wear and tear adds something that enriches with time the materiality of the materials (Odom 2011).

As Aristotle observed, memory will subtract from the thing observed and filter out certain happenings around the thing and therefore reverse the work of the senses – in this way the thing becomes blurred and throws a new understanding on perception, memory and the senses (Harman 2010).

Donald Schon, a philosopher who made a huge contribution to the theory of development of reflective practice and learning, discussed the designer's reflective conversation with materials, with the focus being on the conversation with the medium and its ability to engage with all of our senses as well as being part of the exploratory thinking process (Schon 1987). Physical properties of materials that engage with our senses can be texture, geometry, spatial positioning in relation to other objects, material properties such as weight, and energy such as temperature and moisture. These things have an engaging capacity and beckon us to experience through seeing, touching, smelling, hearing, and are cues for engaging in a participation, intuitive response and manipulation (Jacucci and Wagner 2007).

Idea-generating properties of materials and our interactions with the physical properties of materials help not only the thinking process but also the communicating and engaging process. Bruno Latour takes the idea further and labels communication tools design representations, media and material used in the design process as 'inscriptions', such as drawings, print, diagrams, images, tables, journals, columns, log books, references, indexes, dictionaries, bibliographies, photographs, etc., that can be used to communicate and explore complex

ideas and groupings of ideas using metaphors, visualisations, narration and persuasion as well as evoking the sensorial spectrum (Latour 1983). Social anthropologist Tim Ingold suggests an ontology that focuses on the actual process of formation and transforming of materials, artefacts and things rather than the end product. This understanding begins to allow a more holistic approach, as they can perform multiple roles with a wide experience potential, by their communication, function and interaction experienced by the bodily, tactile, olfactory, auditory and visual senses (Ingold 2008). Paul Klee also insisted and demonstrated in his notebooks that the process of genesis and growth giving rise to things in our world is more important than the things themselves. He described form-giving as, movement, action and life (Klee 1973: 253). Whether those forms are already in the mind or already present as things, art makes visible by combining forces that bring form into being. Therefore a line grows from a point that has been set in motion. Klee said: Art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible (Klee 1973: 43, 253).

Influenced by Klee, philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari argued rhetorically about a way of perceiving 'things' – how they are made, used, their properties, how they mix and meld along with the forces of the Cosmos. There is fluidity in the process of life with a discharge and leakage and a propensity for matter to always exist. They insisted that whenever we encounter matter 'it is matter in movement, in flux, in variation' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 451).

American author, poet and philosopher Henry David Thoreau discussed the forces and dimensions of matter that addled and altered things as being an *out-side* (Thoreau cited in Bennett 2010). Philosopher Hent de Vries similarly talks about 'the absolute or intangible' or imponderable recalcitrance – something detached from representation (Serres 2000). German sociologist and philosopher Theodor Adorno talked about the idea of a 'non-identity', an elusive force or presence and things that always leave a remainder, and life therefore surpasses our understanding and control (Adorno 1973). Seventeenth-century philosopher Benedict de Spinoza claimed that all things have a degree of animation. In theology this is believed to be a divine omnipotence (Bennett 2010).

Political philosopher and professor Thomas Dumm spoke about being surprised by what we see (Bennett 2010). French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in seeking to uproot traditional culturally fashioned perceptions of the world and things, used terms influenced by his travels to some amazing 'breath-taking' places, such as 'the vertical world' of 'brute' or 'wild' perception as it emerges (Coole and Frost 2010). Perceiving items, organic and inorganic, as vibratory, from a moment of being just dead stuff to having a live presence, to having a vitality of materiality – continuing even when discarded or unwanted. It is about entering another dimension of perceiving in our daily lives and occupations and allowing this to filter into life, into our environments, into the agency we have on the world around us. Merleau-Ponty described how our gaze can be influenced by the experience of our body to understanding things around us as having the miracle of expression (Merleau-Ponty 1981).

The voice ... Thingyhoodness

So far we have looked at human perception because it is necessary to begin to open ourselves to a more holistic approach and move to this standpoint to ponder the possibility of human and object/things being equal – there is no hierarchy. This is contrary to the Hylomorphic model and theorists who stated that understanding and empathy come from what people do with objects.

> 'We move from the concept of objects to the concept of "things" and the voice of things – human and non human', writes W.J.T. Mitchell, Professor of English and Art History at the University of Chicago in his work on what pictures – when thinking of them as 'things' – mean and want. 'Objects are the way things appear to a subject – that is, with a name, an identity, a gestalt or stereotypical template. … Things on the other hand …' (Mitchell 2005: 71–82, 156–7).

He discusses how an image or thing seems to look or speaks back and creates a feeling in the subject, allowing the viewer to have a new direction as if the image/object has an intelligence and purpose. Mitchell cites the example of art historians and how they often refer to pictures as though the pictures have their own will, consciousness, agency and desire. He also mentions advertising media and how images can have a great effect on their recipients (Mitchell 2005). French philosopher Michel Foucault described this as being the metaphysics of an object (Bennett 2010).

Elizabeth Edwards wrote about photographs being 'things/objects' of memory. She suggested that the relationship between the thing/object (photograph) and the associated memory, along with the way in which it gains this position of privilege to channel memories, is refracted through the materiality of the photograph. The photograph and its materiality and the image and the object come together as one united form and belong to a class of forms/things that have been made specifically as an investment in a narrative, with links and traces to social biographies, values, and culture. By keeping them, it is an act of hope for the future. If a photograph is rejected and torn up or burnt, this is often seen as an act of violence, distress and hysteria and is indicative of personal wounds and hurts (Edwards 1999).

When considering an object per se, it tends to stand alone – *fait accompli,* or at best in its immediate vicinity. In contrast, when considering a thing and the voice of a thing it involves a perspective that involves a holistic visual perception, looking at all the processes and 'goings on' or 'gatherings' surrounding and involving the thing. It is like the gathering threads of ever-evolving life, involving many participants constantly connecting, participating, inhabiting, leaking, weaving, trailing and knotting together. Twentieth-century philosopher Martin Heidegger described the joining in with this gathering as 'participating with the thing in its "thingness"' (Heidegger 1971: 161–80).

Social anthropologist Tim Ingold argues that instead of occupying a world of formed objects, we inhabit a world by joining in the processes of the formation of materials in a world. We become part of the materiality of this world – part of the voice, part of the 'thingyhoodness'. 'There is a continuous permeability and binding of our surroundings and part of the continuous evolving processes of the formation of living things' (Ingold 2008).

Foucault has a different emphasis from Heidegger and argues for moving from a focus on *things* to a focus on *selves* and how they became *subjects* – not selves as in ourselves always being understood as the subject but 'selves' as things (Rayner 2001).

A designer-maker may be affected by the agency and the voice of the things that are a part of the designer's workspace. The things surrounding the designer may inspire, affect and have many facets of agency upon the designer to inform a piece or body of work. Not only do the things in themselves have agency but the whole assemblage (referred to later) of transient things, environment, temperature, mood, light, etc., feed into the process.

Political theorist Jane Bennett argues towards encouraging a more sustainable and intelligent engagement with 'things' and the voice of things. She refers to the vibrant and lively matter of things. Bennett explores the idea of non-human materials and an active role that these materials may play in life.

The idea of vibrant matter has a long philosophical history, with many claims and ideas from a variety of philosophers. Bennett makes reference to the active role of things as 'thing power' (Bennett 2010). Bennett suggests that if the capacity or vitality of things or voice of things, such as foods, commodities, storms and metals, were taken more seriously, which in turn had the power to block or hinder human will, as well as to be able to act as a force with its own dynamics, tendencies and trajectories, then perhaps public and political responses would be different. Bennett cites the example of patterns of consumption – would they change if instead of being faced with mounting landfill problems we were faced with an accumulating pile of lively and potentially dangerous matter (Bennett 2010: viii, 2–3)?

As Bennett describes when she saw some items over a storm drain on her way to work, firstly it could have been stuff to ignore, but then she realised that each item, as well as commanding attention in its own right outside of human activity, also could betoken human activity. Secondly, Bennett described the stuff as having 'thing-power' – it provoked thoughts and affects, not necessarily in a passive way but thoughts about the ability of the thing's power to make things happen and to produce effects. Thinking about the reasons why she was caused to look at the things as a group of things (e.g. the glinting of the sun, etc.) normally conceived as being inert objects, Bennett describes the objects appearing as an assemblage of 'things' with an energetic vitality in and outside of human context (Bennett 2010: 4–5). Bennett describes the glimpse into 'the culture of things' when she perceived the materiality of all the things that she saw over the storm drain and the never-ending semiotics of this moment.

Windows into observations and perceptions concerned with the culture of things are open when we have an anticipatory readiness and an open awareness to perceiving and listening to things in this way.

Materiality, vitality and vibrancy of 'things'

This inquiry is about the life of things which encompasses the materiality of things leading into a vibrancy and vitality of this materiality. Materialism is a view that everything that exists is either composed of matter or depends on matter for its existence. Materialism is generally contrasted with idealism, which holds that ideas are real and stresses the importance of the mind and soul. Materialists have generally believed that the only things that are real are the things that a person can perceive through his senses and that all events in the universe can be explained by scientific law. There is a denial of the existence of a God who directs the universe and of the immortality of the individual soul.

Spinoza and French philosopher Henri Bergson, although referring to the human body, described a vitality that comes from a thing's own power to preserve itself. Spinoza used the term '*conatus*', being an 'active impulsion' or 'tendency to persist', whilst Bergson called it 'elan vital', being 'inner moments of duration' and alluding to the evolutionary process of 'becoming'. Scientist Stephen Gould, when considering non-human things, described them as having an 'excruciating complexity and intractability' (Bennett 2010). Could not this be equally applied to any matter, as all matter persists, if not in one life, then in another?

Bennett examines the idea of inorganic matter having an energy and potential for 'self-organisation'. Writer, artist and philosopher Manuel De Landa discusses the idea of spontaneous structural generation, such as coherent waves called solitons that form in many types of materials, such as ocean waters, where they are known as tsunamis, and unstable chemical systems which can be variable and creative (Bennett 2010).

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, whose work has been influential in this type of ontology, described a vital materiality (referred to as *difference*) (vitalism being the philosophy that life is a vital principle distinct from physics and chemistry) as a persistent 'hint of the animate in plants, and of the vegetable in animals' (Bennett 2010: 8). New materialists often avoid the distinction between organic and inorganic matter, or animate and inanimate – discerning in both emergent, generative powers or agentic capacities (Bennett 2010).

Merleau-Ponty claimed a unique theme of philosophy to the nexus of 'Nature' – 'Man' – 'God'. He wanted a new way to describe materiality without any assumptions or associations, ontological distinctions or theological presuppositions traditionally made. He wanted to 'define being from within and not from without, where nature, life and man are perceived as diverse folds', as in his account of folded reversible flesh (Coole and Frost 2010: 96–109). He describes the body as being 'a hollow, a fold, which has been made and will be unmade' and understanding life with 'the softness of flesh'. He also made references to coiling, labyrinths, hollows, watermarks, soft flesh and vortices, which indicates a rich and diverse sense of a 'fold'. Jane Bennett similarly describes a materiality as 'enchanted materialism'. Michael Saler wrote that enchantment since the Middle Ages has 'signified both [human] delight in wonderful things and the potential to be placed under their spell, to be beguiled' (Saler 2004: 138). Coole and Frost use the term 'indeterminate and complex choreography of matter' (Coole and Frost 2010: 7–9).

There are the vital materialists such as Kafka, De Landa and Vernadsky, who recognise differences between humans and non-human materials but claim that there is no need to distinguish the vital materials of humans and therefore set a hierarchy (De Landa 1997). Others, such as British palaeontologist Richard Fortey, define humans as complex animals with an intellect (Rorty 1995). Bennett draws attention to the need for an ontological divide between persons and things as there would be no moral ground for differentiating between a germ and a person, and potentially this would give rise to exploitation.

Although working through philosophy we should not underestimate humanity and the power we have – this is our vital materiality. Do you conceive of yourself as being made up of materials that are alive and self-organising, or do you conceive of yourself as being under the influence of a non-material entity such as a soul or mind? Or could both be at work?

The agency of assemblages

A child's world can be filled with all sorts of wonderful animate beings – human and non-human. This rhetoric of 'thing-power' highlights the efficaciousness of objects outside of human meanings, designs or purposes. Is there power, force, energy in things and their materiality? Bennett terms this as an 'outside' or 'incalculable non-identity', pointing to vibrant materials. She also proposes to perceive 'thing-power' or 'agency' in a congregational way as it depends on many other forces and bodies. The concept of agency can be seen as things – non-

human and human – and as being actors and vital materialities. Things are continuously affected and affecting other bodies, as mentioned previously in the designer's workspace. Spinoza describes this as things being a 'mode' rather than a subject or object, and modes being themselves assemblages of many bodies which can modify or be modified by others. Bennett argues for an ontologically 'heterogeneous assemblage' not restricted to humans and their bodies (Bennett 2010).

Merleau-Ponty drew attention to Cezanne who, through painting, used familiar things, suspending typical assumptions of these and allowing them to emerge perceptually.

We live in the midst of man-made objects, among tools, in houses, streets, cities, and most of the time we see them only through the human actions which put them to use. We become used to thinking that all this exists necessarily and unshakeably. Cezanne's painting suspends these habits of thought and reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself. (Merleau-Ponty cited by Coole and Frost 2010: 103–4)

It is a counter-culture way of perceiving.

> The landscape thinks itself in me and I am its consciousness. (Cezanne cited by Merleau-Ponty cited by Madison 1973: 83)

Merleau-Ponty quoted Cezanne to draw attention to the assemblage of the artist, the environment, the paints, the weather, the temperature, etc. This is like Merleau-Ponty's folded flesh description with a blurring of beginnings and endings, expression or man, what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted. A 'matter' that is 'pregnant with form' (Coole and Frost 2010: 103–5).

Moving on from this rich picture of materialism and its vitality there is the notion of the power that comes with this vibrant materiality. French philosopher Bruno Latour rejects human-centred approaches and linguistic turns to philosophy and sees the world as being a network of actors, which have no need of being separated into natural or social groupings. Latour defines things in terms of their relations and discusses how the power of 'things' can be a source or instigator of action such as an object/thing used as evidence in a law court. Latour names this 'real' or 'reality' as being whatever simply resists any trials of strength and also as being an 'actant' or having 'agentic capacity'. He paints a world in which things couple and uncouple their forces with some genuine independence which has the ability to resist and subvert the system (Harman 2010).

Alphonso Lingis writes about humans and an 'other' as an imperative with a face, with forces, with power, as a fetish, as an idol, etc., and questions: do we see this only within our own narrow confines as humans? With this interpretation of 'imperative', Lingis suggests applying the same structure to other organisms and, ultimately, matter. Lingis talks about the causality of things and how they have to coexist within fields of other possibilities. Harman in his commentary on Lingis's essay summarises:

> making room for one another in this way, objects contest each other, seduce each other, empower or annihilate each other. Commanding one another by way of the reality of their forces, the objects exist as imperatives. Like fish hunting food or dogs playing with balls, it is possible that gravel and tar, cloth and magnesium, wage war against one another into submission, command respect from one another. (Lingis cited by Harman 2010: 14–21)

Charles Darwin and Bruno Latour, in their studies of worms, both make a case for worms as being vibrant material with accumulated effects that have far-reaching implications. From the worm mould, which makes the earth suitable for humans which makes possible human history including artefacts, rituals, plans and endeavours, worms participate in heterogeneous assemblages. If perceiving vital materialism with the element of anthropomorphism, it opens a huge dimension without a possible hierarchical system (Bennett 2010).

Philosopher Graham Harman cites Heidegger's theory of things, and expands this to describe the life of things all around us in a global sense, as being a web of tool pieces which have an invisibility as they do their work unnoticed but also form part of a system of realities for the various entities that the 'tool-beings' encounter – causing the realities to be in a constant state of metabolism. His theory suggests that we rely on these tool-beings. Harman describes things as being complex and as events that are irreducible. Deleuze goes further to describe philosophy as a 'creation of concepts' – these concepts being independent forces traversing and apportioning realities, 'watching over our activity, sustaining or resisting our efforts like transparent ghosts or angels. Each of these objects executes a specific effect amidst reality' (Harman 2010: 24).

Alfred Whitehead's term is 'actual entities' or 'actual occasion'. No type of thing or force is excluded, and relations between entities are described as 'prehension', as all objects prehend one another and cause even the minutest effect, unlocking a continuous potentiality in the prehended thing and transforming the thing's energy. The result is 'eternal things' which behave like a theatre in which life takes its course (Whitehead cited by Harman 2010). Manuel De Landa has a theory of society that he labels 'assemblage theory', which suggests that 'every entity results from a mass of smaller fluctuating components that do not form a seamless whole' (De Landa cited by Harman 2010: 170).

We now live in a world of globalisation with dependencies, friction and conflictions, and even this new event space can be termed an 'assemblage'.

> 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. … The effects generated by an assemblage are, rather, emergent properties, emergent in that their ability to make something happen is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone. (Bennett 2010: 23–4)

Bennett, Spinoza and others contend that the understanding of the power of agency and possible intentionality, to make a difference that begs a response, is a power within humans and non-human bodies, and as well as efficacy there is the notion of agency as a trajectory movement of direction and as a causality movement effecting and infusing many levels and both being emergent – being shaped not only by external forces but also by its own receptive and self-organisational capacities according to the vitality of the materiality. Congregational agency is similar to *shi* in Chinese tradition. *Shi* helps describe a force that emerges from arrangements of things such as style, energy, vibes, propensity or trajectory and is vibratory in its ability to alter and with members that can alter (Bennett 2010).

Other strands of vitalism

Within vitalist philosophy there are different strands of vitalism. Christian thinkers such as Leon Kass are pro biblical creation with a hierarchy of matter at the bottom, organisms (Kass defines these as being a material body infused with non-material, with life – life being the cause of metabolism) in the middle, and humans at the top. Kass argues that the human organism is specially endowed with life force as it is designed by God and has a soul. With this version of thinking there is a strong distinction between organic life and inorganic matter – the uniqueness of the human life force is the soul and is celebrated.

In contrast to this, Nietzsche and Thoreau argue that human and non-human bodies both possess a 'vital force', such as in the case of food productive power – they see the eating experience as an assemblage of human and non-human elements which all have agentic capacities encompassing the living world. Here, food is seen as an actant in an agentic assemblage including members such as one's metabolism, understanding and moral values. Perceiving matter as having the ability to self-transform or organise and not simply inert possibly disturbs the more traditional thinking that humans are the only agents with cognitive power to be able to rule nature. When humans are relocated in an environment with its own agentic capacities with a multitude of tiered unintended and unanticipated effects, materiality is vastly broadened (Bennett 2010).

Bennett suggests that if we perceive a bigger sense of the active vitality of matter all around us and in us, if environmentalism shifted to vital materialism, then perhaps current unsustainable living practices would change. There have been other attempts to name and give a philosophical voice to the active vitality or vital force in matter, and these I will now briefly describe.

Bildungstrieb

Immanuel Kant, taking influence from the work of Blumenbach, insisted that there is no such thing as spontaneity or life in matter. Kant did acknowledge, however, in the case of life and matter that his idea of materiality needed a supplement to become active. Kant conceived and labelled this a 'formative drive' or 'Bildungstrieb', as being the something that enlivens and attaches itself to crude, dead matter and gives material its organised and functioning quality. He named humans and humans with a will as being the highest version of this. Other eighteenth-century figures who had similar philosophies were Georges Buffon and Albrecht von Haller (Bennett 2010).

Entelechy

Hans Driesch was an embryologist and was also known as one of the first non-Jews to be stripped of

his professorship by the Nazis due to his objections about the Nazis using the idea of vitalism to exterminate less vital peoples (Bennett 2010). Driesch believed in Kantian ideas about matter. He likened it to the seed of an embryo which is formed with certain predispositions and to there being an invisible presence which is neither mechanical nor soul-like, substance nor energy, performing jobs within an organism and having something like a gatekeeping role to the possibilities of emergences. Driesch described it as entelechy, being a self moving and altering power. Entelechy would be the qualitative difference, for instance, between a car park and a lawn, a human and a corpse. Driesch described it as an incalculable natural creativity (Driesch 1908: 169).

Elan vital

Bergson differentiated between life and matter as separate categories which live in conjunction and competition with each other and that can fix what he called 'tendencies' in the cosmic flow. Life, according to Bergson, has the propensity for activeness whilst matter he saw as being inert and passive with a tendency towards spatialisation (Bergson 1998). Bergson, through studies of organisms, concluded that there must be a non-mechanical agent or an inner directing principle. He maintained that 'entelechy' was a quality of 'the tremendous push of life … the primitive impetus of the whole …the impetus that thrusts life into the world … shaking awake … matter and inserting into it a measure of surprise … passing from generation to generation' (Bergson 1998: 132, 114, 26, 99). Whereas Driesch described entelechy as an intensive manifold with an impulse to maintain the whole, Bergson saw it as a process of self-diversification, disassociation and division, working towards a general goal, and to preserve this but in a transitional way – increasing the instability and indeterminate into material formations through their evolution. Bergson described life as a perpetual efflorescence of novelty (Deleuze 1991).

Design

As a designer-maker working in a deeper awareness of perceiving the world and responding intuitively to the forces and fluxing vibrant materials in the world, there is a shift in perspective and many facets to the perspective to consider. Like the role of a cook, an alchemist, a ceramist or a painter working with materials and not imposing form on matter but, as described by Ingold, 'bringing together diverse materials and combining or redirecting their flow in the anticipation of what might emerge' (Ingold 2008). Following the forces and flows are not the same thing as reproducing but involve a far more exciting, possibly unpredictable journey of joining, gathering, melding and becoming. Deleuze and Guattari termed this 'the gathering together of the threads of life' (Deleuze and Guattari cited in Ingold 2008).

The term 'actor-network', a term especially advocated by Bruno Latour, refers to connectivity, network and netting – much like woven fabric, lace and the spider's web. The spider's web does not have connecting or joining points. It is simply exuded from the spider into its environment and becomes the lines upon which it lives, perceives and acts – an image of the fluid character of life and the continuous trajectory of becoming (Latour 1983: 15–25)?

Life and conclusion

This inquiry has sought to open perceptive, sensorial, new ways of thinking and inquiring into the life of things. 'Life' has many descriptions: Bennett describes life as a restless activeness. *A Thousand Plateaus* points to life being a matter movement or matter energy – becomings – entering and leaving assemblages. When Deleuze and Guattari discuss life and material vitality their focus is on a vibratory efflorescence present before and after any arrangement (Bennett 2010). Friedrich Nietzsche wrote:

> Do you know what Life is to me? A monster of energy … that does not expend itself but only transform itself … [A] play of forces and waves of forces, at the same time one and many … a sea of forces flowing and rushing together eternally changing. (Nietzsche cited by Bennett 2010: 54)

About growth in relation to life Paul Klee wrote, 'the relation to earth and atmosphere begets the capacity to grow … the seed strikes root, initially the line is directed earthwards, though not to dwell there, only to draw energy thence for reaching up into the air' (Klee 1973: 29). And Heidegger wrote, 'The earth and sky is interlocked and cannot be thought of without the other. Each partakes of the essence of the other' (Heidegger 1971).

Bennett writes, 'We at first may see only a world in our own image, but what appears next is a swarm of "talented" and vibrant materialities (including the seeing self)' (Bennett 2010: 99). Bennett's philosophy is one of thinking about 'affect', not just specific to humans but to non-human bodies as well, and

highlights involvements and interdependencies. She emphasises two main points – first, the agentic capacity of things, and, secondly, through being enchanted having strengthened agentic capacities.

When considering current concerns about environmental issues a more materialist approach would be to move from an environmentalist living 'on earth' approach to a vital materialist living 'as earth' approach, being far more in tune with materiality and the vying with agentic assemblages – being alert to the capacities and limitations of, say, the 'jizz' of worms, as Bennett describes. We as humans could be a material part of all other material parts and as we have considered matter to be vibrant, lively, full of energy, quivering – it changes a linear and determined perspective to a world governed by emergent causalities. Vital materiality also highlights our own bodies as not just being purely human but populated by many other foreigners – we are an array of bodies. We are an 'affective' body alongside 'affective' non-human bodies (Bennett 2010).

This inquiry points to a sense of everything being 'alive', creative and generative, whether it be a human, an animal, a plant or materials in a studio. Deleuze and Guattari stated that nature is a 'pure plane of immanence … upon which unformed elements and materials dance' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 255).

The subject of the vitality of matter or the life of things is easy to lose grasp of. Especially as humans we already have influencing cultural attachments to ideas of inanimate matter, of humans, and of God, and the agency of grammar does not lend itself to a language that can give voice to things. I feel that whether you resonate with this thinking or not, there is certainly room and challenges for new perceptions and respectfulness for the 'vitality' of things. Why can certain vitality not equally coexist with those who believe in a hierarchical model and belief in God who instructed us to have good stewardship of all creation?

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