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Situating research on art, technological practices and literature: new materialist and posthumanist feminist perspectives

Situar la investigació sobre arte, pràctiques tecnològiques y literatura: nuevas perspectivas feministas materialistas y posthumanistas

Situar la recerca sobre art, pràctiques tecnològiques i literatura: noves perspectives feministes materialistes i posthumanistes

Silvia Luraschi (ORCID: 0000-0002-87619134) University of Milano-Bicocca;

Federica Timeto (ORCID: 0000-0003-2492-733X) Ca' Foscari University of Venice

Sibel Yardımcı (ORCID) 0000-0001-7748-8946) Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University.

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This special issue collects a selection of contributions presented at the “Feminist Art, Technological Practices, Literature, New materialism, Posthumanities” strand at the 11th European Feminist Research Conference, which took place at the University of Milano-Bicocca from 15th to 18th June 2022. The aim of the whole event, whose title was “Social Change in a Feminist Perspective: Situating Gender Research in Times of Political Contention”, was to explore social changes during the Covid-19 pandemic from a feminist perspective and a variety of disciplines. In particular, the recent pandemic made us (as the coordinators of this strand) think about the need to start looking for different ways of thinking, acting, and performing social change.

An innovative feminist intervention is needed in order to interfere in what feminists see as a reestablishment of neoliberal structures (Revelles-Benavente, 2021) that impose a perpetual state of war (Negri & Hardt, 2001), competition and individualism as the “new way of the world” (Dardot & Laval, 2017) – resulting in differentiated global waves of ecological destruction and social dispossession. Choosing the topic of our panel, and selecting the papers afterwards, our intention has been that of foregrounding the importance of adopting new materialist feminist approaches (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008) as a strategy to dismantle existing dualisms and oppressive structures that are hereby being reinstalled in society.

Posthumanism and new materialism are two umbrella terms for various cross-disciplinary challenges to rethink the way prevailing assumptions are structuring the relationships between the “human” and “non-human/more than-human/other-than-human” worlds (as various feminist scholars like Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Donna Haraway, Stacy Alaimo, Anna Tsing among others explain). Both provide ethic-onto-epistemological paradigms that break through traditional dualisms, such as man/woman, human/non-human, culture/nature, subject/object of research, in which one of the terms is designated as inferior, this devaluation being the basis for domination, exploitation, oppression, extractivism. Priority is instead given to relationalities, intra-actions (Barad,

2007), entanglements, diffractions (Haraway, 1997), always preceding the emergence of contingent, partial and hybrid social actors and their multiple configurations. This also implies a trespassing and possibly deconstructing of disciplinary boundaries, bringing together the arts and the sciences, as well as the social and the natural sciences perspectives, now more than ever engaged in fruitful transfusions and hybridizations.

Departing from Haraway’s situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988), we acknowledge that one of the most important contributions of new materialisms to feminisms is a situated methodology in which the “God trick” is challenged, and the researching subject, as well as the researched object, are understood as parts of a dynamic, affective and “entangled” (Barad, 2007) relationship. The political and ethical consequences of such an approach are paramount: differences are never already there to be represented from the outside but are always in the making (Timeto, 2011); each epistemological intervention at the same time interferes with the material-semiotic reconfigurations of the world and can be considered an engaged practice that performs the co-emergence of both meaning and matter.

The faith in the truth of representation and of sight as the privileged sense of knowledge acquisition and documentation still appears as the leading principle of the natural sciences, as Benedetta Panisson affirms drawing on Haraway. Her paper takes the cue from a submarine expedition that took place in 1993, during which two mating octopuses, both males of unknown species, were filmed by the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in their habitat, the dark depths of the Ocean, which the human gaze “violently illuminated” (p. X) for the occasion. Looking at the scene with the eyes of an artist and diffracting scientific vision through it, Panisson wonders why animal sexuality appears so astonishing, for whom, who looks and who has the right to do so, and how invasive this look can be. Panisson conducts an analysis that involves her personally, but which does not allow her to adopt a decisive point of view with regard to this animal appearance, which rather raises a series of questions about the margins of visibility, its normativity and what

remains excluded from the picture. Drawing, among the others, on the notion of zoösis by Una Chaudhuri (2016), Panisson asks: “What do we see in what we have not seen before, and, in the logic of the blind spot, what do we not see in what we do see?” (p. X). She then goes on to problematize the normativity of this look that at all costs tries to define what rather appears as a body without organs (Artaud, 1975) arguing for a liberated gaze that, in turn, also liberates an “inappropriate/d” performativity of the body on display, as Haraway (1992) would put it.

The eyes are also the protagonists of Jannis Steinke’s paper, who re-turns to the renowned Romantic novel *Sandman* by E.T.A. Hoffmann through Haraway’s diffraction and the quantum physics concept of dis/continuity as reformulated by Barad (2010). In going back to what can be conceived as a parable of scientific and masculinist hybris, Steinke renounces reproduction and, drawing on a variety of philosophical sources, rather “matterphors” the narrative (according to the term coined by Gandorfer & Ayub, 2021) to grasp a material-semiotic reality and relocating the lost/blinded/exchanged eyes in the flesh: objectivity is replaced here by op-jectivity, a matterphor that Steinke uses to refer to “the throwing/leaping of the eye(s)” and the “I” as well (p. X), both of which lose mastery over reality. Nathaniel’s, the novel’s protagonist, mind and body fall apart together, demonstrating that vision cannot exist without a body and that the collapse of vision, and reason accordingly, also reveals all the body’s vulnerability. Steinke concludes her complex analysis recurring to a “vio-lens” that, while diffracting the violence of hegemonic vision, works fiercely against hegemonic violence, and is capable of resisting to, and eventually overturning, the Law (Derrida, 1992).

Starting from a violent concept of time in the Anthropocene where each moment is absolutely present and then absolutely past, dead, and forgotten, Susanna Schoenberg’s article discusses a selected art project in the perspective of a practice of composting in relation to “timespace-matter”. The reference to “timespace” intends to operate on the idea of a “reality” not made by separate, discrete entities,

where the distinction and juxtaposition of “subjects” and “objects” is expected to be composted and operated as a relational practice. According to Karen Barad, “spacetime-matterings” refer to “turning it over and over again—iteratively intra-acting, re-diffracting, diffracting anew, in the making of new temporalities (spacetime-matterings), new diffraction patterns” (Barad, 2014, 168). To reflect on it, Schoenberg refers to the collaboration with the trans-disciplinary collective *Kompostistische Internationale*, expressly inscribed in the concluding artwork *Dissolution Table*. The project is based on the “infiltration” of (recording) media and the introduction of a differentiated form of authority into a situation that was not sketched by Schoenberg (*Kompostistische Internationale*, 2022). The result of the first collaboration is that the artist sets the indeterminacy of the “subject” as an “emerging” material, while the further developments of the “form finding” for *Dissolution Table* have been discussed and questioned within the working group.

These three research papers situated in between literature, science and art show how feminist research is always positioned and engaged, on multiple levels, with the material realities of life on our planet. We consider it significant to highlight a further characteristic element of this way of moving in the world: feminist new materialism research is a doing and thinking that bridges individual lives (Formenti, Luraschi & Del Negro, 2022) and highlights the rhizomatic interconnections (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) of living’s experiences.

A collective investigative practice is at the centre of Lenka Veselá’s research that presents the Endocrine Disruption Tracker Tool (EDTT) as a speculative instrument. This tool kit was created by herself to inquire into how chemical endocrine disruptors affect us and focuses upon the ways in which they can influence our emotions. The article demonstrates how industrially manufactured chemicals are capable of mimicking or interfering with the ways in which the body’s hormones typically work (Bergman et al., 2013). The EDTT invites participants to attend to and act upon these changes to our sensory and cognitive

capacities, as well as our emotional well-being. Following Ahmed (2004), she suggests considering the social practice of expressing emotions that are caused and modulated by involuntary exposure to chemical endocrine disruptors. The article discusses the potential consequences of feeling angry, frustrated, and sad because of chemical exposure, which stresses how our ecological interconnections are also a source of vulnerability, apart from being the very condition of life flourishing.

The condition of women flourishing is also part of Marta Olivi's paper who was working on feminist dystopia as a source of a political and ecological impulse capable of renovating utopian thinking (Baccolini, 2020). Olivi analyses a novel of the American writer Diane Cook entitled *The New Wilderness* (Cook, 2020) through the lens of food. The novel is considered a significant example of what is called Anthropocene fiction because food is highlighted either as the hinge of the relationships between human and non-human and as a class of objects that can drive the

protagonist through her process of becoming (Braidotti, 2013). In summary, from this perspective, food can be used as a powerful vector of performative meaning to create a posthuman female identity. Reading Olivi's essay, the reader will gain a wonderful sense of how the evocative power of literature can inspire daily life practices and make materialist and posthuman theories very concrete and close to each of our lives.

Although dealing with very different topics, at the same time the five articles in this special issue share a common desire to think and act critically in order to produce social change through their theoretical and engaged analyses. In inviting you to read them with care and attention, we want to renew our belief in the importance of feminist new materialist and posthuman research for breaking down traditional disciplinary boundaries and to also overcome the theory/practice divide, to promote a complex view of the troubled world in which we live.

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Author information

Silvia Luraschi (ORCID: 0000-0002-87619134)
silvia.luraschi@unimib.it

Silvia Luraschi, PhD, is a pedagogist, Feldenkrais method practitioner, counselor, and researcher in Adult Education. She works as a coordinator of social service for families on the edge of Milan, and she is collaborating with Milano Bicocca University in projects related to the promotion of reflexivity in educational settings. Her research interests include embodied narratives, aesthetic practices, and walking methodologies. She is involved in the Life History and Biography Network of ESREA, European Society for Research on the Education of Adults, and in the international group of feminist scholars and activists Gender Justice, Creative Pedagogies and Art-based Research coordinated by the University of Victoria, Canada. She is involved in Experiential Translation Network: Meaning Making Across Languages and the Arts. Her last book is *Le vie della riflessività* (Armando, 2021). She loves to swim in the open sea, but also in public swimming pools.

Federica Maria Giovanna Timeto (ORCID: 0000-0003-2492-733X)
federica.timeto@unive.it

Federica Timeto is an undisciplined and interdisciplinary antispeciesist feminist. She deals with the visual arts, new media and Critical Animal Studies. She teaches Sociology of the Arts and Critical

Animal Studies at the Ca' Foscari University in Venice, and is also a member of the International Association of Vegan Sociologists, the Technoculture Research Unit (TRU), The Institute of Radical Imagination, and Ecologie Politiche del Presente. She writes on blogs, academic journals, militant journals, and is on the editorial board of Liberazioni, Studi Culturali, Lagoonscapes. Her latest book is Bestiario Haraway (Mimesis, 2020). She lives in front of the sea, with a daughter and three cats.

Sibel Yardımcı (ORCID: 0000-0001-7748-8946)

sibelyardimci@gmail.com

Sibel Yardımcı is a professor in Sociology at Mimar Sinan University of Fine Arts, Istanbul. She completed her PhD in 2004 in Lancaster University, UK, Department of Sociology, with a dissertation titled "Meeting in Istanbul: Cultural Globalisation and Art Festivals". Her various publications are a book in Turkish drawing upon her PhD thesis, and articles, books, and book chapters reflecting various aspects of her recent research interests, including the city, (urban) citizenship, nationality/nationalism, biopolitics, queer studies, disability and debates on post-humanism.