

Object Puzzles

Agency and autonomy in visual artworks

MA Thesis Contemporary Theatre, Dance and Dramaturgy

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Abstract

Two of the contemporary philosophies on materials and objects; the so-called Object Oriented Ontology and Vital Materialism, resonate with the striving of visual artists to create a vocabulary for art-practices in which the agency and autonomy of objects are being explored.

In this thesis these two very different ontologies will be investigated and are put to the test within two case studies, a visual art project 'The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things' by Mark Leckey and a body of works by David Bernstein. These works seemingly try to convey, or alternatively deal with, according to the words of the artists, an inner life of objects and materials.

In this thesis I will demonstrate that the philosophical approaches do offer indeed a vocabulary that offers visual artists a vocabulary that can be expanded upon.

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Object that does nothing next to the object that does nothing

Two objects for sale in the Japanese design store Time & Style in Amsterdam, as seen on November 4, 2018.

1.0 An investigation scene in an art class and the autonomy of objects

Imagine, a room, a piece of wood on the floor, a crooked lamp standing next to it, leaning towards the wood. The wooden shape shows a mix of organic features and there is a round cavity in the middle. Some pieces of cloth are lying scattered on the floor; out of the pocket of a jacket three ceramic sticks probe in the air. The door in the back of the room stands ajar; behind it a coat is hanging on a pin. Four persons are walking in this room, talking about the situation of the objects, on all details: the recurrence of the wood as a material, the way the jacket is neatly folded, close to the shady lamp. Is the lamp guarding over the jacket? The lamp is leaning and the sticks in the pocket of the jacket are erect, so maybe they represent the old and the new in the life of the jacket. The question arose: can a shape not only "be" a shape but 'do' something as well? If the cavity in the middle of a shape mirrors an open door, can we say that this cavity perhaps not only emphasizes the act of mirroring, but also "invites in" the way an open door "invites in"? Or is 'inviting' something only humans can do?

It may seem we are in the middle of a crime scene investigation, but instead we are in a classroom, attending an art class at the fine-art department of the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam, in 2018. I am a tutor at this academy and situations like the one above are exemplary for contemporary art-classes in which students investigate into installations consisting of a wide array of objects and materials. The students attempt to find out how objects relate to one another and the different ways in which one can interpret them, while focusing on the sensory and material properties of artefacts, with an emphasis on active verbs: the objects are 'doing' something: In our daily lives, in archaeology and anthropology man-made objects are mostly considered to have a function in the service of humans. We tend to look at man made things as being lifeless and to evaluate them in terms of their use value. In the art class example cited above, the symbolic meanings and functionalities of the objects are either not addressed, or they are addressed as little as possible. Instead, the participants try to divert the attention from the human 'realm' to what materials and things do and how they interact and respond to each other, how objects express, rather than represent, the actions of a surpassed moment, how they execute a move or an autonomous gesture of interaction with or towards each other, in what could be described as a non-cynical and a meaningful way.

There are various ways one can look at objects. On the one hand one can focus on their functionality, on their capacity for representation, on their recognisability or on their aesthetic potential, or, on the other hand one can look at their agency. One must take into consideration that in order to probe the agency of objects, the choice of objects always plays a role. The question then arises whether functional objects are more agentic than aesthetic objects? In other words, can an object, let's say a lamp, protect, or guard over some other object or thing, let's say a table, or a chair?

The foregoing relates to a discussion based on an observation of things in their own 'thing-world', and yet we have to recognize that we are restricted to our innate human perception, consciousness and intuitions subsumed under our human viewpoint. A consideration of the agency, autonomy and being of inanimate objects presents a challenge for us to step outside of this restricted human perspective. Immanuel Kant already has reflected upon this dominance of the human viewpoint in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787). Kant argues that humans perceive objects as representations only, not as things in themselves. This separation between object and representation is what he referred to as 'transcendental idealism'. "By transcendental idealism I mean the doctrine that appearances are to be regarded as being, one and all, representations only, not things in themselves, and that time and space are therefore only sensible forms of our intuition..." (1933, 345). This condition of experience is essential to humans as they perceive and understand things as being both spatial and temporal. Kant argues that man's speculative reason can only know phenomena; he cannot enter into a knowledge of the *Thing in itself* (Ding an sich) (2004, § 32). In other words, humans cannot

cognize objects within themselves. Yet in this class, about 225 years later, students and teachers try to think beyond human perception, towards the realm of things and materials 'in themselves', within their own form of being.

1.1 Introduction

The example of the art-class presented objects as if they have a life of their own and as if they can do things. Can objects be thought to act in the form of leaning, standing, mirroring, probing, or guarding over? If so, this is an indicator of an autonomous capacity of objects to act. Can a table guard over a chair? Can a tree guard over a house? In other words, can autonomous agency be ascribed to objects?

The example of the art-class is not an isolated phenomenon; there has been a growing interest in what things and materials can do, starting in the 1970's when anthropologists and sociologists became interested in how things have an influence on human life. The anthropologist Daniel Miller wrote "that there can be no fundamental separation between humanity and materiality – that everything that we are and do arises out of the reflection upon ourselves given by the mirror of the process by which we create and form and are created by this same process (2005, 8). In the last decades however there has been a growing interest and a shift of emphasis from how things are effective through the mediating agency of human consciousness to what things do outside human consciousness, seeing both objects and living beings as actors irrespective of whether we are referring to animate or inanimate, living or non-living entities. Tracey Ireland and Jane Lydon wrote in *Rethinking Materiality, Memory and Identity*: "... , an anthropologically-informed approach to knowledge construction has focused more explicitly on the active role of the non-human in shaping life, an interest that signals a shift in analysis from what things or images mean, to what they do..." (2016, 2). Researchers and anthropologists like Tim Ingold demonstrate the relationship between people and things as mutually constitutive (2000), while political thinkers like Jane Bennett try to envision matter itself as lively or as exhibiting agency (2010). This focus on the life and agency of things and the material aspects of culture has been called the material turn.

In this thesis I want to find out if and how insights and definitions from the material turn can be used to develop an understanding of the notions of the autonomy and agency of art objects. I will do this on the basis of the works of two theorists who exemplify two different views on (the) agency and autonomy of objects and things: the O(bject) O(riented) O(ontology) of Graham Harman and the vital materialism of Jane Bennett. According to Graham Harman, his object ontological perspective on the agency and autonomy of objects is mutually exclusive with the vital materialism of the other theorist; Jane Bennett. While the two authors investigate a lot on the autonomy and agency of objects in general, the question comes forward if their approaches work for art-objects as well?

To examine this I will consider two case studies: an art-project of Mark Leckey and several artworks of David Bernstein. In his performances David Bernstein explores the functions and beings of objects. In his project *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things* Leckey imagines how so called 'dumb' things, like artistic artefacts, but also everyday objects like shoes and cars and relics from the past, can communicate with each other. Can the philosophical writings and tenets of Harman and Bennett provide a vocabulary that reflects the strivings and the outcomes of these works?

1.2 The Material Turn, Jane Bennett and Graham Harman

In the material turn inanimate objects are ascribed a newfound significance traditionally reserved for living beings.

The philosopher Graham Harman and the political theorist and philosopher Jane Bennett can be categorized within the paradigm of the material turn. They challenge our awareness and taken for granted concepts regarding things: Harman with the enigmatic force and autonomy of the 'real being' of the (singular) object, which can be sensed through art. Bennett's assemblages of humans and materials, on the other hand, which can be discovered in the world around us, challenge us to revise our intuitive notions of separateness, connectedness, subject and object and inspire us to consider the agencies of objects and their capacity to connect.

Harman's ontology stands for the separation of beings, while at the other end of the discussion, Jane Bennett's book *Vibrant Matter* provides an insight into relational theories (2010).

We will explore Harman's work partly because it represents one end of two extremities in the discussion on what things do, their agency, and what things are, what constitutes their autonomy. Harman has a strong relation to art; in *The Third Table* he designates art as the only way of uncovering the real, true, beings of objects (2012). According to Harman objects are autonomous, they exist outside of our human knowledge. He describes objects as lying motionless next to each other in total reclusion. Harman theorizes that all objects must have a real being, an essence, as there must be a something that holds all the qualities and features of an object together. This real being is normally hidden from view. The idea is that we can never understand an object - understood as human or as nonhuman - as we can never gain access to its real being. Harman describes the autonomy of the real beings of objects, in other words the real objects, in terms of their separateness from human beings. This implies that we can never come into contact with objects in their essence or real being. We can - in Harman's view - only come into closer proximity with the real being of objects through artworks, but never with the fundamental essence of other objects. Moreover, these real objects have an agency embedded in their being: an agency that can prompt sudden eruption or change, like a stone that suddenly runs down a slope. Harman also tries to demonstrate how, in close contact on a sensual level, objects are influenced by the sensual qualities of other objects. In the process, the real being of any given object will withdraw even further into itself in hiding.

In her book *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett describes how she conceptualized the term 'vital materialism': "My inspiration is to articulate a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans to see how analyses of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due" (2010, VIII)). Bennett tries to demonstrate that everything in this world is made of human and non-human connections and challenges us to see objects as part of our own involvement in this world. Within these assemblages non-human things can act on the same level as humans, which implies that all things can have an influence on the bond. Bennett uses the word actants for all (non) human elements within a bond, referring to a term coined by the philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist Bruno Latour (2005). Bonds between different bodies or actants create living, dynamic and ever changing assemblages. These assemblages live and act on their own; Bennett interprets their autonomy in terms of independence from human will or consciousness and in terms of the relative independence of the diverse actants within them. Bennett claims that objects thrive from becoming entangled; the more complex the entanglement the more conducive for the object's survival. Bennett understands agency in close connection with the drive of actants and assemblages to grow together. Some examples of the manifold forms of agency that she describes are the tendency to conglomerate, the power and striving to connect and persist and the need to constantly change.

The theories of Harman and Bennett seem to differ fundamentally on the notions of autonomy and agency, the two notions that this thesis will be based upon. This means it is necessary to further analyse these concepts for an adequate understanding of how these theories can explore autonomy and agency within works of art. In this thesis Harman's and Bennett's use of concepts like 'thing', 'object' and 'matter' will be examined alongside their definitions of the conditions, actions or interactions of humans and objects, as well as their suggestions for different ways of observing these phenomena.

Before proceeding to the main questions that will be explored in this thesis I would like to spell out some important aspects of the artists and their work chosen as a foil for Harman and Bennett's theories.

1.3 Mark Leckey and David Bernstein

Two case studies will be researched in this thesis: the first is an art installation called *The Universal Addressability of Numb Things* by Mark Leckey (2013) and the second case study comprises several artworks by David Bernstein. I have chosen these artists as the notions of autonomy and agency in their works seem to resonate most with either Harman's or Bennett's approaches. Yet I will investigate their works from the perspective of both theorists.

Bernstein's fascination with inanimate objects recurs in an attempt to penetrate to the heart of what objects, mainly tools and instruments, are once they have lost their meaning for humans. The theories of Harman seem to resonate most with Bernstein's ideas and works.

Leckey on the other hand delves into the ontology of objects by fusing, mutating, juxtaposing and confounding objects with one another in an effort to infuse them with a new dynamic. Bennett's vital materialism finds a more exemplary illustration in the artworks of Leckey.

An additional reason for choosing Leckey and Bernstein is that they both practice performance art and this expertise characterizes and co-determines their decisions in creating artworks and art-objects. In other words, they have a keen notion of agency in relation to art-objects.

In his installation, consisting of a diverse array of old and new design objects and art artefacts, Leckey puts network theories to the test. In a lecture he gave on his project he explained how he became interested in the difference between what he calls 'dumb' objects and liveliness, and how this inspired him to relate to animism and network theories (2013).

For Leckey network theories offer the possibility of understanding connections between things. For Leckey this relates to animism and to how people are interested in technologies in which household appliances can communicate with each other. The installation has been exhibited in various museums; in each museum the assemblages of objects vary as Leckey keeps on adapting and changing; apparently assembling itself has become a vital and pivotal and element of the work. Leckey's extensive lecture on this work creates the opportunity, not only for researching what Leckey was trying to achieve with this project, but also for gaining a perspective on his way of working within the project. Leckey mentions Bruno Latour a number of times in his lecture, which makes it appropriate to concentrate on the influence of Latour's ideas on Leckey's art projects instead of Bennett. Both Latour and Bennett have developed a relational theory of objects. That said, Leckey's intrinsic interest in and examples of how he envisions 'aliveness' within his art projects led me to focus rather on the ideas of Jane Bennett in analysing things and their agency and autonomy. Bennett's materialism stems from a vitalist tradition that not only connects to Latour but also concentrates very specifically on the energy of (assemblages of) things.

Leckey's art works will be explored using his own explanatory lecture, as well as the theories of Jane Bennett. Additionally Leckey's lecture and artwork will be compared to the writings of Graham Harman on the autonomy and agency of individual objects.

David Bernstein is a contemporary artist who has a design background. He develops objects and performances in which he examines these very objects. The objects appear useful at first sight, like tools, yet they often consist of two objects that merge together or they are bent and are in fact very useless. Beginning from these shapes, he generates associative stories that circle around the objects. In these stories he tries, in his own words, to think from things' perspective and through things and relates these findings to his own or his family's life. In these performances Bernstein's personal quest and the object he has created or observes gravitate together in myriad directions. Each time Bernstein thinks he has found a clue to the origins or the being of the object it transforms into something else, following the process that unfolds for and with the object, anticipating its moves or communicating to it. There is never one story, never one truth; overlapping narratives play off of one another and build multiple truths for one object. I will first explore if and how Bernstein's thoughts and works on the subject of agency and autonomy of things resonate with Harman's theories. There appear to be correspondences here between the approaches of Harman and of Bernstein; Harman's notions of the way an object withdraws once another object shows up in its vicinity has correspondences with Bernstein's objects that disappear once he gets closer to them. The way Bernstein's objects fuse and change seem as well to resonate with Bennett's assemblages. Should we look at Bernstein's performances in terms of (autonomous) assemblages or should we look from the perspective of individual, isolated and autonomous objects? Do they have an agency that erupts from the inside or should we talk about their transformations in terms of their ability to connect?

1.4 Presentation of questions

In the light of the expose of the work of the two theorists and the two artists we can proceed to a presentation of the main questions and a methodological task for this thesis.

The question we will attempt to answer is this:

How can the viewpoints of Harman and Bennett contribute to the experience and understanding of autonomy and agency in the art-works of Leckey and Bernstein?

As a sub question we will try to make clear how the approaches of Harman and Bennett can be situated within the material turn?

1.5 Methodology

The aim of this thesis is to find out how the different approaches on autonomy and agency can be used to interpret art objects. In the next chapter I will investigate the theories of Harman and Bennett from the perspective of their position in the material turn. In the third and fourth chapter the theories of Harman and Bennett will be analysed with an emphasis on their approaches to autonomy and agency. In the fifth and sixth chapter the artworks of David Bernstein and David Leckey will be analysed through the concepts derived from the approaches of Harman and Bennett on autonomy and agency. Next I will explore how and which artworks of Leckey and Bernstein can demonstrate the definitions of Harman and Bennett on autonomy and agency. In doing so I try to find out if both theories can be used to define autonomy and agency in two very different artworks by focusing on the singular art piece that in this case is made up of an assemblage.

In the conclusion I will look back at the research results and add recommendations for future research from the perspective of the experiences of both agency and autonomy within artworks.

2.0 The Material Turn, a short introduction

Chandra Mukerji writes in her abstract for *The Material Turn*: “There is a growing literature in the social sciences addressing the importance of artefacts, natural forces and material regimes to social practices and systems of power. It looks at how material forces affect the conduct of everyday life, discusses how and when nonhumans have agency, and explores the methodological value of studying materiality for illuminating under-examined forms of social life - particularly the lives of non-literate or suppressed groups.” (2015,1). Mukerji expands on how in the material turn inanimate objects are ascribed a newfound significance traditionally reserved for living beings: “Social life is no longer imagined to be a human drama taking place against the background of an independent and static natural world, but is understood as activity within shared ecologies of people and nonhumans: states armed with weapons, corporations located in skyscrapers, furniture makers working with wood, labourers getting dressed for a job, or families socializing with pets” (2).

According to Tracey Ireland and Jane Lydon this approach leads to a de-centralisation of human agency and to the undoing of binaries, for instance those between thoughtful human and the inert, meaningless non-human. “It has been taken up by those concerned with breaking down the Cartesian opposition between nature and culture, tangible and intangible, subject and object” (Ireland and Lydon, 2016, 2).

The interest in material aspects of culture has a specific history and originates from various historical sources like Marxism and the interdisciplinary field of Material Culture Studies. In the last century anthropologists and social researchers like Arjun Appadurai and Daniel Miller have stressed the influence of things and materials within our culture, often in their social and cultural context. However, these ‘material culture studies’ focused mainly on culturalist studies of material culture, in which things are often reduce to meanings, or to social relations (Pinney, 2005). In the last few decades anthropologists, sociologists, ecologists, archaeologists, philosophers and researchers in the field of S(cience) and T(echnology) S(tudies) attempt to conceptualize a more independent life of things. Since the material turn new theories and ontologies have developed like the actor-network theory that understands objects as fully agentive as developed by Bruno Latour (1993), the vital materialism of Jane Bennett, new materialism, the assemblage theory of Manuel DeLanda, the agential realism of Karen Barad and towards the autonomy of objects in (Object) O(riented) O(ntologies) (Bryant, Smicek and Harman 2011; Bogost 2012). These theories all aim at reconfiguring their conceptual apparatus to accommodate the role of non-humans, for instance in the A(ctor) N(etwork) T(theory) of Bruno Latour, an approach in which human agency is de-centred and that explores how meaning and effectivity are constituted across networks that include non-human actors.

These developments in the humanities, anthropology and the arts correspond with contemporary critiques on the so-called anthropocentric viewpoint: a belief that interprets not only the world but also the whole universe in terms of human values and experiences. In this belief human beings are considered to be at the centre of life and all other things and beings as mere contributors. Anthropocentrism holds that human life has intrinsic value and that other entities are resources that may be exploited in order to support human life. Criticisms on this anthropocentric viewpoint form a cornerstone of material studies and have led to an extension of notions like ‘intrinsic value’ to objects and matter. Already in the 1970’s, ecological and environmental philosophies conceived a form of self-realization, calling on humans not to consider themselves at the top of the ecological chain, but rather as just one part of this ‘web of life’, on an equal footing with every other part (Naess and Sessions, 1984). The Deep Ecology movement stated in their manifesto that nonhuman life has value in itself that is independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes (1984).

Cooler and Frost refer in their collection *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* to the findings of deep ecology, by arguing that because of contemporary economic, environmental, geopolitical, and technological developments we bear new responsibilities for the nature and for social and political relationships (2010). Scholars like Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Jane Bennett and Manuel DeLanda see the world as a complex and process oriented entity and raise - for example - questions on the ways that we produce and consume our material environment.

These scholars seek to reduce the presumed distinctions between the physical world and social human constructs like thoughts, meanings and desires; they speak of the entangled nature of knowing and being. Their field of research consists of all animate organisms and human bodies; material things; spaces, the natural and built environment; material forces including gravity and time; and social and abstract concepts. The materiality addressed is relational, open, complex, uneven and contingent; it cuts across dualistic boundaries between natural and social worlds; and for some new materialist scholars it is invested with a vitality or liveliness. Concepts are used such as affect, assemblage, intra-action and thing-power to denote and explore how things and materials affect each other and humans. This web of factors can be paralleled to the dynamic interactions of the natural world.

2.1 Bruno Latour

The notion of an agency of things owes a lot to the extensive explorations of the sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour and his A(ctor) N(etwork) T(heory) (1993). Latour studied objects or artefacts in relation with their networks of spaces, technologies, instruments, humans, bodies and their relationships with practices. Latour found that everything in the social and natural world consists of different networks. All factors in a given situation or network, objects, ideas, natural elements or humans, act within these networks on the same level; Latour indicates with this that they all have agency and that all actors can influence the network as a whole or partly. According to the ANT empirical investigations should describe and explore all its relational ties, this implies moving from understanding objects as stable, to a sense of the unstable, shifting and manifold nature of materials.

Bruno Latour focuses on everyday materials and things to demonstrate how networks affect our daily lives. He introduced and used terms that extend the notions of agency towards the non-human: the first is 'actants' (the word resembles the word 'actor', but appears less subjective); denoting human or non-human sources of actions that have an influence on situations or networks and that modify a state of affairs or other actors. It implies no special motivation of human individual actors, or of humans in general (2005). The word 'affordance' originates from the American psychologist James Jerome Gibson. It indicates how an object or environment can offer the potential to change behaviour, by Latour's addition of the 'actant' the agential role of objects expanded, affordance then defines "the potential of something to take hold of passers by and force them to play roles in its story" (1994, 31). Quasi-objects define all objects that bend human practices in several ways and (re-) configure human relations amongst one another constantly.

Latour's ANT has been important for Harman and Bennett in different ways.

Harman was initially enthusiastic about ANT as Latour was one of the first philosophers who consciously and irreversibly put aside the privilege of humans over non-humans and one of the first philosophers who envision humans and things as working and living together on an equal footing in an interdependent entanglement. Harman wrote a full-length treatment of Latour's theory, called *Prince of Networks* (2009). In this book Harman acclaims Latour's work, particularly how Latour pays detailed attention to things, even to mundane things that at first sight seem unnoticeable. Yet Harman was also critical of Latour; according to Harman, Latour's networks are flexible while the human and non-human actants within them never change and their qualities stay the same, because

the network itself already changes and looks for new, different actants or replaces old ones. In that regard Latour's ANT could not explain why objects change at all. This is important for Harman as he is interested in the real being of an object that exists on its own and that can act or change of its own accord.

Jane Bennett elaborated on Latour's network theories and on his recognition of the active participation of nonhuman forces in events. Her relational theory is founded on ANT together with the notions of the philosopher Spinoza on conative bodies. According to the philosopher Spinoza, any body, simple or complex, aims at collecting and connecting to other bodies, in order to thrive (1677). Bennett theorises a vital force that can be found in any group or assemblage of things, a proactive, self-organizing, self-regulating, thing power. The idea of conative, throbbing assemblages form the basis of her vital materialism.

2.2 The material turn and Harman and Bennett

Since the material turn scientists, artists and philosophers have investigated what has been considered and rendered most passive: objects and matter. They wanted to push these notions of a non-passive conceptualization of objects and matter even further and started investigating and considering materials and things on their own terms.

Within this paradigm shift, objects and materials are thought to affect each other as well as humans, even outside of human vision, influence or control. Autonomy and agency come forward as two of the main aspects that can demonstrate that things and matter have an existence, and even a life of their own.

Two of the writers who have focused on objects as having a life outside human consciousness are Harman and Bennett. They both elaborated upon the ANT of Bruno Latour and they developed two approaches on the independent life of objects, with different, sometimes opposing thoughts on the autonomy and agency of objects. Bennett resonates with the many scholars who have elaborated on relational approaches, who envision the world consisting of things, material and humans that interrelate and that communicate with each other through a web of factors, assemblages or networks. Harman went into a different direction; he considers objects as autonomous and agentic, just like Bennett, yet he argues that within relations objects (denoting both humans and non-humans) impair each other.

In the next chapter the philosophies of Harman and Bennett will be elaborated upon with a focus on their understanding of autonomy and agency of objects.

3.0. Graham Harman's Object Oriented Ontology

The OOO is a speculative school of thought. Graham Harman, the founder of the OOO, proposes that objects exist independently of human perception and thought.¹ With this he tries to enter the Kantian Thing-in-itself. In *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the metaphysics of Objects*, Graham Harman argues that we humans should imagine that objects have their own lives (2002). Harman proposes that each object has outer sensual qualities and an inner real being, what counts as the real object. He indicates how objects have different, sensual qualities (like shape, skin, structure and weight) and he indicates that there must be a being, a something that holds these specific qualities together, or even animates them; this is the real being of the object, or, the real object (2011). It is difficult, almost impossible, to enter into a relationship with the real object that resides in an isolated world of its own. So how can we ever get to know it? And if it has agency, what is this agency capable of? Questions if and how relations between objects exist at all, and of what quality they are, lie at the basis of the notions on agency and autonomy in OOO.

In order to unravel the notions of the autonomy of the real object that Harman describes and in order to understand the specific agencies that these real objects have, it is necessary to understand what exactly real objects are and how they can be distinguished from their own, as he calls it, sensual qualities (the skin, their colour and so on).

In this chapter Harman's theories on the autonomy and agency of objects will be explored; first we will look at how Harman analyses real objects and the sensual qualities of objects. Harman draws inspiration from the ideas of Husserl; in the second paragraph we will see how Husserl conceptualized a gap or divergence between the two. Next we will see how Harman elaborates on Heidegger in order to demonstrate the existence and the autonomous life of objects. In paragraph 3.4 we will explore how Harman understands the (human) wish to enter into relations with real objects as a crucial trait that enables one to cross the boundaries that hide real objects from view. Harman describes how certain sensual or enigmatic qualities of objects encourage and allow for such relationships.

Harman ascribes autonomy and agency only to the real inner being of objects, which is why they are very limited. In the last paragraph we will look into these notions and in the active forces or dynamics that he leaves out of his definitions on agency, as they pertain to the sensual qualities of objects.

3.1 Autonomy and real objects

Harman considers each and every object as completely isolated and separated from all other beings. In other words no object can enter the inner sanctuaries of another object (he uses the word 'object' to define everything from a thought, to an action, to a human being, an institute or a thing). Harman challenges us to see objects as enigmatic, almost impenetrable beings. To understand Harman's theory we need to see how he understands the real being of objects as something separate to the sensual qualities of objects. Once an object comes into close proximity with another object their sensual qualities may touch or influence the sensual qualities of the other object; in Harman's vocabulary they even reach their sensual tentacles out to us, to lure us into their vicinity: "The shimmering of waves in a pond, the arthritic pains in a fireman's knee,, are capturing our attention with their sensual facades" (2005, 26). Since Harman thinks that these relations affect only superficial or sensual parts of objects, but not their real inner beings, in other words the 'real objects', live in "vacuum-sealed isolation" (2002, 287).² This implies that real objects

¹ Harman describes his thinking alternatively as ontology and as metaphysics, as he elaborates on the basic structural features of all objects and on the fundamental traits of very specific types of entities.

² Harman is convinced that not only humans and animals are excluded from access, cannot reach beyond a certain sensual access to objects, but also that "one billiard ball hides from another no less than the ball-in-itself hides from humans",

can never touch. Harman presents the autonomy of objects in terms of an absolute independence and separateness from any other object.

Likewise the agency of any real object is absolutely autonomous, and never influenced by any other object. The agency within these almost impenetrable dimensions of beings can generate unexpected behaviour, like the sudden eruption of a volcano or a stone that all at once rolls down a slope. The sensual qualities or traits on the other hand can be seen as active elements within Harman's theories, as they are open to various interactions like fusing or enveloping. Harman however does not allocate agency within the realm of sensual parts of objects.

Harman claims that only artists can cross the divide and provide us a glimpse of the real object, by playing a game of hide and seek. The dynamic of hiding and revealing is, according to Harman, innate in every object and it is the work and the domain of artists to elaborate on this dynamic game. Harman claims that artists seek to create a moment in which the real object emerges beneath its sensual qualities; this is what he calls the moment of allure. Harman mentions allure as a force that does not intrinsically belong to the real object. It is an energy that is at work at the moment of allure; when a things unity and its plurality of qualities somehow partially disintegrate and the real object shows a glimpse of itself.

Objects exist independent of human perception; they do not have to be experienced in a specific way, for instance a tree needs not be experienced as such in order to function as or to be a tree. It merely manifests specific qualities that are different when someone is sitting beside this tree or when an animal is eating from it. On the other hand one can make a caricature of the real object: we select one feature, perhaps only its surface or a certain sensual quality, and mistake it for the real object and by so doing proceed to ignore its inner being. Yet in spite of that misapprehension the real object will never change; it will withdraw only further.

To give an example: if someone has a love-relationship with another person, then this someone may be enchanted or allured by the person's hair, way of talking, of moving or whispering. Yet all these qualities together do not define the whole being of that person. We can mistake movements and hair for the whole person, but in that case we make a caricature of him or her. Yet we can sense that there is more to that person. In love we can get more access to another one's being than in other relationships; in love we may discover glimpses of the real person. Yet we will never see the real person together with his or her sensual features, in other words, we will never know the entire being of that person. Harman suggests that there is ultimately a fundamental gap between people and that relations function largely on the level of sensual accidents. Based on this misapprehension we tend to caricature one another's beings as a matter of course.

Contrary to the misapprehension of caricaturing one another, the autonomous real object - or being - appears as something enigmatic; it withdraws and exists, even though we may not see it. Harman never describes the real object, and this leaves us wondering, what it is? This is not to claim that human beings do not intuitively attempt to contact autonomous beings; we see this unfold in acts of listening, talking, contemplating, analysing; in trying to get to the bottom of things', nonetheless we often tend to mistake a sensual feature or quality for the autonomous being. At that moment the real object withdraws even further. Helen Marten, a London based artist, addresses the fear of mistaking sensual features for the real object in her book *Parrot Problems*: "they (things) are absolutely never talking to us. So it's a visibly masturbatory feedback loop: there I am, pasting my own language onto a reflective surface and getting of on the complimentary glow of false exchange!" (Marten, 2016, 120).

implying that the real being of things are also hidden for other (real) beings or objects. (2002, 188). Neither can animals or other beings access any real object: "Dogs do not make contact with the full reality of bones, and neither do locusts with cornstalks, viruses with cells, rocks with windows, nor planets with moons" (2002, 206).

3.2 The sensual object, sensual qualities and accidental qualities

Harman dedicates the second chapter in his book *The Quadruple Object* to the philosopher Husserl, as, according to Harman, Husserl was the first to discover a rift between objects and their qualities (2011). Husserl did not consider objects outside of human consciousness (which, according to Harman, could result in the disputability of the existence of objects while the observer sleeps) (2011, 22).

Husserl made a philosophical project out of observing objects carefully and systematically. His intention was to strip away the inessential aspects or qualities of objects in an attempt to reveal the essence of an object. For Husserl, essential did not mean invisible or hidden. Clearly evident qualities and features of objects were counted as essential features if they could pass the test of systematic reflection conducted in a phenomenological method that he devised and that he called 'eidetic' imagination. This consisted of removing features of an object and once the object changed in an essential way, he would call the feature essential. This in contrast to Harman who maintains that no clearly evident or visible features can claim to being the essential features of what are always the hidden essences of objects.

Harman describes how Husserl experimented extensively trying to observe objects with all their peculiarities. In each moment he discovered new details of the object: when his mind was in different moods, when the weather conditions and the light were different, when observing the object from different viewpoints, colour perspectives and shapes (2011). According to Harman, Husserl had taken up the task to try and combine all these features, as all these together would shape the essential object.

While Husserl's accumulations may have been complex, Harman differentiates more layers, but he never tries to combine them into one whole. Harman calls the sum total of things that happen around the object, influencing its appearance, like light and weather, the accidental features. Sensual qualities are aspects like the colour and shape of an object; these belong to the total set of components that make up any given sensual object. Sensual objects can touch each other by creating a close proximity. "They somehow melt, fuse, and decompress in a shared common space from which all are partly absent" (2007, 190). Even though many different qualities render an object complex, Harman suggests they must have a reality or inner core that stays permanent. In the contact between a real object and a sensual object, the sensual object prevails: "Sensual objects have a different fate from real ones. Whereas real zebras and lighthouses withdraw from direct access, their sensual counterparts do not withdraw in the least. Each sensual profile is encrusted onto the unified zebra-object like a patina of brine" (2007, 195). Thus the real object and its sensual parts seem to exert different activities: the real object can hold different qualities together whereas its sensual parts can touch the sensual parts of other objects and somehow fuse together. The real object can withdraw whereas its sensual qualities reach out.³

3.3 The real object and Heidegger

Harman wanted to prove the existence of real objects by elaborating a tool-theory based on

³ In order to elaborate for a moment on Harman's terms and to anticipate on what they could possibly bring in for artists here is a short thought experiment on accumulations of sensual qualities: as impressionist artists focused exactly on the sensual qualities and accidents of things only, emphasizing accurate depictions of light in their changing qualities, could their paintings indeed be read as "big lumps of different colours"? To start with Harman's terms "these big lumps of different colours" are collected on a canvas; in this case canvas (form) and colours (sensual qualities) create together a painting, a sensual object. Than according to Harman art works on a different level: art is indirect and has a metaphorical nature, referring to things and drawing them into each other's vicinity. If impressionism is about the subjective perception of the observer, than this perception could be the real object in impressionism. In that case, one can argue, the colours and the form do not inherently belong to the perception, but they are drawn into the vicinity of "perception". Together they would say something about perception, about how perception could look like.

Heidegger's investigation of tools. He devoted his book *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (2002) on this subject.

Harman elaborates on Heidegger's two most basic neologisms 'present at hand' and 'ready to hand'. Harman exemplifies the difference between the two in his elaborations on Heidegger's tool analysis of a hammer. The term 'present at hand' implies looking at, analysing or contemplating an object. According to Harman this leads to shallow observations, only addressing the colour or the weight of the hammer, or its usefulness. The term 'ready to hand' is primordial and frames the object according to its functionality, an object that we are involved with, like a tool that we pick up as soon as we need it. For Heidegger something important occurs when the hammer, as soon as we use it, disappears from view, and our attention now focuses on the nail that is going to be driven into the wall. If at that point the hammer breaks, we enter a state of 'breakdown' and perceive the hammer in a different way; maybe we don't even look at it, but we feel its entire being. In our bodily or peripheral awareness we can sense it; its weight, skin and force; all of it in a short-lived moment. Heidegger writes: "We discover its usability, however, not by looking at it and establishing its properties, but rather by the circumspection of the dealings in which we use it." (1962, 102). This circumspection is like awareness in the back of our heads or in the memory of our hands. Harman adds to this: "When objects fail us, we experience a negation of their accessible contours and become aware that the object exceeds all that we can grasp of it" (2007, 193). For Harman the tool analysis not only exemplifies that objects must have real beings but also that these real beings can be sensed, albeit not in a direct way. The idea or the image of an object that is absent plays a role in the works of David Bernstein, this will be elaborated upon in chapter 6.

3.4 *The Third Table*, art and allure

Heidegger and Harman describe how failures allow us to perceive a very short glimpse of the real object. But what about breaks in artworks? For Harman art forms an exception. In a lecture Harman gave at the Institute for Contemporary Art in London (2014), he mentioned *La Grande Verre* (1923) of Marcel Duchamp, a glass artwork that is broken. Duchamp stated that the break has completed the work. According to Harman the break gave permanent access to the real inner being of the artwork. So what is different in art in the opinion of Harman?

The arts rely on sensual qualities within artworks. In that regard these sensual qualities in artworks can be seen as obstacles to access the real (art) object. Yet Harman asserts these very qualities in art can also stimulate the disclosure. According to Harman, in art relations do not negate but originate from the sensual sphere. Harman discerns qualities that can provoke a (temporary) disclosure of the real object, for instance allure which indicates a seductive force that can open an object, so that one can get a glimpse of its real, true being.⁴

The Third Table is an article that Harman wrote for the 13th Documenta in Kassel (2012). It presents two physical tables and one non-physical table that each present a way in which objects are experienced and interpreted. The third table brings forward the arts as a way to access the real being of the table, by moving beyond its sensual qualities. Harman is convinced that humans are looking for something deeper within an object, he mentions that "there is the attempt to establish objects deeper than the features through which they are announced, or allude to objects that cannot quite be made present" (2012, 14). Harman postulates that this sincere wish of human beings to get into contact with another real being form the backdrop of an artist. He describes the

⁴ "Objects are no longer merely unverifiable hypotheses that perhaps lie somewhere out there beyond our perception and perhaps do not. Instead, though hiding from all comers, they extend their forces into the world like the petals of a rose or the tentacles of an octopus. The world is dense with sensual or elemental relations between things: a form of realism far more enticing than the tedious kind repeatedly denounced or evaded by human-centered philosophy" (*Guerilla Metaphysics*, 2005, pp. 170-171).

arts as an erotic model that withdraws and is alluring in its very withdrawal, untouchable and unknowable. The more it withdraws, the more we want to access it. Yet while Heidegger's hammer had to break or disappear in order to see its soul, the sensual qualities of the artwork will still be present and visible together with the real object beneath. In explaining the dynamics of withdrawing, Harman relates art to beauty. He claims that "a similar cutting of the bond between an agent and its traits occurs in beauty, in which a thing or creature is gifted with qualities of such overwhelming force that we do not pass directly through the sensual material into the unified thing, but seem to see the beautiful entity lying beneath all its marvellous qualities, commanding them like puppets" (2005, 142). Harman calls the moment when a sensual object splits from its sensual qualities 'allure': a bewitching moment, an experience that allows the 'soul' of a thing to come out of its hiding. It is a seductive power as it alludes to mysterious depths of objects (2005, 153). We can imagine that what he means as corresponding to the comparison he makes between beauty and love. Beauty in art appears as a kind of soul animating its features from within, while "in love, the beloved entity has a certain magic hovering beneath the contours and flaws of its accessible surface" (2007, 216). Here Harman describes a moment in which we not only see the outside of an object, not only its soul, but also its entirety.

The difference between the entire object and the real object is that the entire object comprises the real object together with its sensual qualities. Harman's term 'splitting' that describes the distinction between the object with its sensual qualities from its real being, can be misleading - the term 'revealing' that Harman uses as well seems a better choice to describe this dynamic process: the real being is revealed beneath its sensual qualities rather than split from it as a component part.

The examples Harman offers for understanding allure in art are poetic metaphors: beauty, cuteness (of children or recently born animals) or more generally failure, hypnotic experiences, names and love encounters, which he summarizes under 'the comic and the charming'. Art and most specifically metaphor can bridge the gap between real objects and other objects like human beings: Harman sees metaphor or traits of sensual qualities in different objects as what is capable of drawing objects into one another's orbit. The object is now free from its bondage to usual things and functions and appears via metaphor like the soul of the other object, an animus. For instance, if one says: 'my legs are like these trees', the legs, without physical or sensual constraints, appropriate some essential tree-aspects. These tree-aspects can reveal essential aspects of my legs, for instance their strength, weight or straightness. The artist has an active role as he has to seek for the real object by applying and testing combinations of objects and materials that can act as metaphors.

In art sensual qualities evoke an erotic longing for the hidden, real being of the object. Harman claims that real objects animate their sensual qualities from within. Through beauty, art, metaphor or humour, allure creates a disintegration between the real object and its sensual qualities, allowing the real object to become visible. Here the real object can somehow invade the sensual field; "its sensual qualities becoming animated by allusion to its deeper powers" (Harman, 2007 220). Thus the sensual realm is the much-needed realm for any object relation; the domain of the arts.

3.5 Harman on autonomy and agency

From this brief introduction to Harman's thinking we can summarize his notions on autonomy and agency. In the first place Harman describes the inner beings of objects as autonomous and solitary. It is not clear from Harman's writings if the real being of objects can transform, yet they can sometimes move, or erupt, outside of human consciousness. This agency does not emerge from a relationship with other objects. Though Harman acknowledges only this particular, autonomous and mysterious agency, there are other forces, dynamics or activities to be found in his writings. Yet he does not define them as agencies: for him 'agency' can only denote the action of a real (isolated)

object outside of the relation to other things. Relations between sensual qualities and features are possible, albeit on a superficial level. Yet according to Harman in art relations can originate from the sensual sphere. As this thesis is about art, the dynamics emerging from the sensual sphere will be included in this thesis, yet different words will be used to describe them, like 'forces', 'dynamics' or 'activities'.

The first activity Harman mentions is withdrawing; the withdrawing of the real object can be understood as an impetus, a drive, albeit a negative one. Related to this is the dynamic interplay between withdrawing or hiding, and revealing. This can take place within an object; a dynamic that artists expand on while making an artwork. Ultimately, when the work is 'finished' the public can participate in this game of hide and seek; when the artwork seems to reveal itself the public will try to grasp its meaning, but sooner or later the artwork withdraws again.

Next Harman states that the real object can hold different qualities together. In art, questions relating to the influence of qualities of one object on the other play an important role. For instance if a yellow art-object is standing in front of a green wall, we can perceive it as being influenced by the green paint. It may even 'look' greenish. If we realize that the yellow object and the green wall are both working hard at holding their qualities together we may experience them as more forceful objects than they otherwise would be as singular objects. Harman uses the word 'fusion' to denote how sensual qualities and features (like light, shadow) mingle with those of other objects. Holding together belongs to the real object, while activities like merging and fusing to its sensual realm. Harman adds that real objects exercise a certain influence on their sensual bodies as they express themselves through their sensual components or embodiments. Seen this way, the act of expressing may be called an activity as well.

In relation to art three more forces can be detected: allure performs the dynamics that entice humans to look beyond the sensual features of objects. Allure does not intrinsically belong to an object, but it is connected. It is an energy that becomes visible and is at work in the moment of allure; the moment when a things unity and its plurality of qualities somehow partially disintegrates. Connected to this disintegration, Harman mentions the intentionality or sincerity of humans and non-human objects to meet, a process in which one of the entities is absorbed in the other. In the two last examples a force is at play that affects both human and nonhuman objects.

Brian Massumi, a contemporary philosopher who investigated affect, explicated the term in a foreword to *A Thousand Plateaus*, a book by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari: "AFFECT/AFFECTION. Neither word denotes a personal feeling (sentiment in Deleuze and Guattari). L'affect (Spinoza's affectus) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a pre-personal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act. L'affection (Spinoza's affectio) is each such state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body (with body taken in its broadest possible sense to include "mental" or ideal bodies)" (1980). This transformation of the state of the body resonates with Harman's descriptions of absorption or of the bewitching moment of allure; the moment when we can see the real being of an object lying beneath its sensual features. Within allure the dynamics of having an affect or being affected can be considered transformational forces in which objects and humans are included.

To resume, Harman acknowledges only one notion of autonomy regarding objects, which is that of the isolated, withdrawn real object that can express only one, spontaneous and unexpected agency. Yet in art other forces and dynamics can be found that can be directly linked to objects or their qualities as well.

4.0 Jane Bennett's Vital Materialism

In order to understand what autonomy and agency denote in vital materialism, Bennett's thinking will be explored in her book *Vibrant Matter* (2010).

In this book, Bennett makes reference to the thinking of Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari and to the ANT of Bruno Latour, and from a lecture that she gave on the topic of hoarding (2011).

Bennett's theories can be seen as very different from Harman's; her vision focuses on entanglement while Harman focuses solely on separated objects. The grammatical structure of sentences defines the object as the entity that is acted upon by the subject. Bennett, like Harman, attempts to undo this object-subject binary. Bennett prefers the term 'thing' over 'object'; she sees things as vivid, autonomous entities and thus not reducible to the contexts in which humans set them. Bennett tries to demonstrate that everything in this world is made up of human and non-human connections, and that non-human things can act on the same level as humans, implying that they all have an influence on the whole. According to Harman, objects, unlike things, are not identical to any fusion of details; thus Harman prefers the term 'object' to define the autonomous character of humans, material things, organizations and ideas.

For both Harman and Bennett the idea that things have a life of their own, outside of human consciousness or knowledge, renders them autonomous. For Harman, autonomy also denotes that objects do not connect and are isolated from each other. Bennett however argues that things always belong to groups; her vision describes autonomy and agency of things in terms of their manifold relations. For all elements within a group Bennett uses the word actants, referring to a term as coined by Bruno Latour. According to Bennett the group as a whole has a force, a life, a direction and an agency of its own and all actants have an influence on it. The autonomy of the group and of each actant within it is based on their existence outside human consciousness, on the force and direction of the bond as a whole and on the amount of influence each actant has within it. While the different actants can influence the group, the group still has a force of its own in the form of a striving or a will to persist. From that perspective groups and actants are relatively autonomous.

Bennett borrows the term assemblage from Deleuze and Guattari's book *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) to describe these specific bonds of things. The term is taken from the French 'agencement' which means to arrange or lay out. Used by Deleuze and Guattari, the term is a framework for analysing social complexity and the self-organization of any system, emphasizing fluidity, exchangeability, and multiple functionalities through entities and their connectivity. "In assemblages you can find states of things, bodies, various combinations of bodies, hodgepodes; but you can also find utterances, modes of expression, and whole regimes of signs" (Bennett 2007, 177). Bennett draws on these notions, she prefers the term assemblage to the term 'network' by Latour because she connects the term assemblages to liveliness: "Assemblages are living, throbbing unions that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within" (2010, 24).

Assemblages are vibrant wholes that constantly change. Bennett claims that they do so in order to persist. This striving to persist is derived from the concept of conative bodies; a term coined by Spinoza, denoting an innate inclination of a thing to continue to exist and enhance itself; the instinctive "will to live" of living organisms. According to Spinoza, "each thing, as far as it lies in itself, strives to persevere in its being" (Ethics, part 3, prop. 6).

Bennett coins the term thing-power; a vitality or a force of things, "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (2010, 6). She claims that things are alive because of their capacities to make a difference in the world, to have effects, to shape the web of interrelationships of which they are a part.

Bennett regards the world as filled with assemblages: humans are always already connected with things and things act as much as humans do even though humans may not be aware of being part of assemblages. Bennett's agency is one that seems more or less equally distributed amongst

humans, materials and things. She demonstrates a vital materialism that moves towards the embrace of humans and things in an entangled coexistence. She claims that things and the tiniest elements within them have an impulse to collaborate and grow together.

4.1 Deep Ecology

Bennett's vitalism is based on thinking about ecology on a global level; her assemblages incorporate nature at large and all kinds of natural elements, also on a microscopic level, like microbes and bacteria. Her thinking resonates with the idea of the 'web of life' of the Deep Ecology movement. The disastrous *Kill a Sparrow Campaign*, initiated by Mao Zedong in 1958, can exemplify the importance and the influence of the idea of a 'web of life' on her conceptualisation of assemblages (my example). Mao Zedong ordered the Chinese people to kill all sparrows in the country. The reason for this was because the sparrows were eating the grain supplies. What this policy did not take into account was that sparrows eat insects, and thus have another positive role to play alongside the perceived negative role of devouring the grain supply. After all the offending sparrows were killed, swarms of locusts appeared that in their turn devoured the crops, now without a natural predator; the rice crops disappeared in front of the farmer's eyes. The eradication of sparrows illustrates a lack of insight into the fragile yet powerful relation between the components of an assemblage, in this case grain crops, sparrows and locusts. Human beings often do not recognize which agents constitute an assemblage, which counts as an important reason for why catastrophic events can unfold. Bennett recommends a green materialism that requires a sensitization to the 'outside that is inside too'; where the sparrows that seem at a distance from our human lives in fact have a substantial impact on our communal and personal lives, and even on our stomachs. The example illustrates a failure of insight into and a failed understanding of the interdependence of assemblages.

4.2 Assemblages and actants

In order to step up to what constitutes vitalism in her relational theory, Bennett quotes Lucretius who claimed in his book *On the Nature of the Universe* that there is nothing made of solely one primordial material or substance "nor anything that is not created of well-mingled seed" (2010, 22). With this Lucretius refers to an internal diversity of things, and to the degree to which each object or being is interdependent. Bennett elaborates further on Spinoza's conative bodies, referring to conatus as an 'active impulsion' or tendency to persist. Spinoza argues that all finite bodies or modes strive to persevere in being, which is "nothing but the actual essence of the thing" (Ethics, part 3, prop. 7). This is what he coins as conative bodies. With this he describes bodies, simple or complex, that need to change constantly, that aim at collecting and connecting to other bodies in order to improve themselves. All objects and beings within the conative set-up are striving to persist; and all things are "animate albeit in different degrees" (Spinoza, Ethics, pt. 2, prop 3, scholium 72). Bennett elucidates how in Spinoza's ontological vision 'conatus' denotes the effort required to maintain the "specific relation of movement and rest" that obtains between its parts within a body (2010, 47). According to Bennett this is a process of continual change, in which each body must seek new encounters in order "to modify and be modified by others" (2010, 22). Bennett adds that as humans and things need to grow, the encounter with things will always be a constructive and positive one.

Bennett names all (non) human participants or elements actants after Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theories. Bennett defines an actant as neither an object nor a subject but an intervener. The word defines anything that modifies different elements or actors within a network through a series of actions. Actants can change their directions and speed towards the other actants to try

and find the most effective ways of interacting. That said, the behaviour of an actant in an assemblage can be ambiguous; assemblages act as a group, but they are not always harmonious or stable; some elements may be at odds with the whole and create tensions. These actants may form smaller bonds with other components within the cooperation, or leave and join other assemblages. At this point the departing element acts on its own, albeit only for a short while. "Because each member-actant maintains an energetic pulse slightly "off" from that exuded by the assemblage, such assemblages are never fixed blocks but open-ended wholes" (5).

Bennett asserts that assemblages have a distributive agency; this implies that their efficacy depends on collaboration, but also that they don't have one subject as the root cause of an affect. There are always swarms of vitalities at play; there is not one 'doer,' there are 'doings'. Conative bodies, assemblages, qualities and propensities of the different actants are continuously affecting and being affected by other bodies; they are susceptible to affects of other human and nonhuman elements. This is an on-going process that humans are mostly not aware of, even though their own bodies can be involved.

Bennett also defines an effectivity proper to the action itself, arising only in the doing and thus in principle independent of any aim, tendency, or characteristic of any actant (25).

4.3 Thing power and vital materialism

Bennett mentions thing-power as an energetic vitality inside things. Thing-power refers to how man-made items can manifest a sort of aliveness that exceeds their status as objects, and how these items can have an effect of their own, independent from the words and feelings we project on them. Bennett recalls one morning in Baltimore where she observed a glove in the street, some pollen, a dead rat, a bottle cap and a smooth stick of wood. She noticed that, though these objects were collected on a pile of garbage, she could see each thing as a thing in and of itself, and caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each. This observation resonates with Harman's elaborations on real objects in allure. Yet Harman explains allure as a one to one relation in which one observer enters into a relation with an object that reveals itself for a moment but that furthermore stays isolated. Bennett's observations on the other hand encompass the garbage as a whole: the separate things not only produced effects on the tableau, it was also precisely the tableau as a whole that made her perceive the different things within in it. Thus thing-power is not only a vitality that remains inside thing, but it connects to and affects its surroundings.

The interactions between viewer and thing are not the same in allure as they are in the perception of thing-power: Harman points out that the viewer has to be sincerely interested in the object of interaction while the object opens up and thus reveals itself, while Bennett mentions how she needed a readiness in-side herself to anticipate the other thing on the out-side. Thus instead of the thing that opened itself up, it was Bennett who opened her mind and her body towards the out-side. She even wonders if the 'swarming activity in her head' was itself an instance of the vital materiality that constituted the garbage (10). Bennett attempts to conceive materials, like those of the human body, as self-organizing and lively, just like those of the pile of garbage. In that case our powers are also thing-powers.

From thing power that denotes an energetic vitality inside things and the idea of conative bodies that strive to persist by continuously connecting and changing, the image of an entangled and lively materiality that runs from humans to nonhumans appears. It is an agency that emerges as the effect of (temporary) assemblage of human and nonhuman forces. In order to perceive this vital force interrupting the connections within an assemblage is a good way to realize and reveal it's agentic qualities: breaking the chain of a bike affects not only the way one moves through a city, but also reveals the effectivity and power of a network that connects to the chain: mobile phones, bike-shops, public transport and other citizens.

4.4 Hoarding

In a lecture *Artistry and Agency in a World of Vibrant Matter* Bennett examined TV series on hoarding to expose how hoarders explain the physical and emotional bonds they experience with objects (2011). She noticed areas of confluence between hoarders and non-human things and similarities between hoarders and artists. "At a certain moment it dawned on me that not only the behaviour, preferences and language of hoarders resonate with those of artists, but also the materials they collected or worked with." She indicates how hoarders have feelings for things and how these things have a certain power over them. In fact they have a quite precise vocabulary that expresses these bonds and that articulates how they experience the autonomy and agency of things. In this thesis the lecture will be involved as an addition to Bennett's book *Vibrant Matter*.

Bennett discerns five ways in which hoarders express their bonds with things:

1. Materials and things are slow; they show endurance and they are patient, like cocoons of slow matter. This is in stark contrast with human beings who are less patient and have only few years to live; things can compensate for people's mortality. This bond is not as much about aesthetics as about qualities of an object, like slowness: hoarders connect to particular qualities of objects.
2. Hoarders find it difficult to distinguish between a person and a thing. We humans live always already with lots of non-humans, bacteria, metals and things and we create all the time other non-human things: music, meetings, in short, other porous bodies. But hoarders are more open and attracted to congregations with other materials and things. This also reflects how their idea of the self is less defined and thus can accumulate without end; as Bennett states, they are bad at subtraction but good at reception. It is in the nature of bodies to be susceptible to infusion, invasion or collaboration by or with bodies. Any contour is subject to change as bodies are essentially intercorporeal; the membranes of all bodies, humans and non-humans, are somewhat porous, and each body bears the imprint of the other. Bennett states that the bodies of hoarders are aggregate bodies: the pieces they collect are less possessions than pieces of self. They even collect rotten food in their cocoon, but they don't smell it, as one does not smell his or her body in general. These collections reverberate with the self, or with parts of the human self like (rotten) food can resonate with intestines.
3. Hoarders demonstrate how humans are not the only agents and how things can be in charge of humans: Bennett describes how one of the hoarders picked up an item out of a huge pile of garbage and declared: "The pile just accumulated". The hoarder thinks she is not in charge; it is the things that accumulate. All hoarders describe how things command to take them home or how they "are alive" and elicit "positive attraction"; "things draw us near". Thus hoarders indicate that things have their own autonomy and agency.
4. Hoarders have more sympathy for the inorganic than other people. They talk about the 'it' within them and they are able to make a connection with the outer 'it'. They express sympathy with bodies that are normally assigned to different categories, for instance they connect life to matter, and persons to things. This highlights the extent to which human being and thing-hood overlap.
5. Hoarders have something in common with artists; it is not only their preference for the material world that illustrates this, they also share a sensitivity to the somatic, or physical or inert effectivity of objects. Bennett describes how one of the hoarders exclaims: "visual art bounces my electrons!" This demonstrates an aesthetic call of things, though hoarders don't see themselves as artists, in fact they often cherish objects that others regard as ugly and useless. The fact that these things have no economic value relates them again to artists. Yet the hoarders fascination resonates more with a

mawkish sympathy or affinity for objects, hoarding objects for being cute or cuddly rather than for their appeal to a quality of an aesthetic fascination of some kind.⁵

In her lecture, Bennett used a language that expanded on her elaborations in *Vibrant Matter*. Objects become part of the human body and life and acquire a voice and agency, they become roommates or they connect to the inner tissues of the body. These assemblages make the hoarder feel stronger; they reinforce the human on a somatic, emotional and corporeal level. This relates to the conative power of assemblages and to the idea of conative prone bodies that are willing to connect. Bennett mentions propensities and qualities of bodies, like porousness and the idea of a flexible contour, slowness and patience, cuteness and the somatic effectivity of bodies. In the lecture, agencies of things like resonating, accumulating, commanding and compensating come to the fore as well as notions on autonomy: "The pile just accumulated".

Harman suggests qualities like sympathy and cuteness in order to enter into a relation with objects as well, yet the kind of connection he seeks is a very brief and virtual one. Bennett's hoarders seek for more physical and psychological relations that last a lifetime, and for connections with qualities of objects as well. Harman on the other hand claims that relations with sensual qualities caricaturize the real being of the object that thus will withdraw. As opposed to Bennett, the impression is that Harman does not qualify these relations as vital, simply because the real object, with its very specific agency, withdraws in the contact.

4.5 Agency and autonomy in vital materialism, a summary

The main notions on autonomy in *Vibrant Matter* can be found in assemblages or conative bodies as a whole and in the autonomous striving of bodies or actants to create ever-bigger agglomerations. According to Bennett assemblages and actants act outside of human consciousness. In addition, autonomy can be found in the way assemblages strive to develop more effective agglomerations by searching for conducive connections and interconnections. This implies that assemblages can differ from one another. Each new actant in an assemblage can change the connective set up, thus each has an influence on the whole. Actants can leave an assemblage and search for a new group. Actants can also apparently trigger their volition, like electricity, to bond as soon as possible with an assemblage as their efficacy - all too often - depends on the collaboration of different forces. Seen this way the concept of autonomy in the writings of Bennett refers mainly to how things act outside of our consciousness as well as to the relative independence of assemblages along with the diverse actants in it.

The agency of assemblages comprises the vitality of matter to conglomerate or form heterogeneous groups, the striving to persist and the necessity for constant change and transformation. Additionally, bodies or agents can have different qualities and propensities that stimulate contact or movement. Some examples are: the possibility to connect to the quality of a thing; the porousness of bodies and their flexible contours; the competency of objects and beings to resonate with the inner parts of another body; the capacity for objects and beings to command human behaviour; the quality of things to attract and draw us near, that is, objects or beings can have an aesthetic. Qualities of things can direct human behaviour; when they are for instance harmless they can attract us. In referring to Spinoza Bennett notes how bodies are action prone. The agencies that came forward can thus be summarized as follows: connecting or stimulating contact, conglomerating, resonating, commanding, attracting, compensating, persisting, changing, transforming and reinforcing. Another agency is that of an effectivity proper to the action of agglomerated objects; assemblages in action have a power and efficiency that transcends the

⁵ The word *advenience* as used by Barthes in his book *Camera Lucida* refers to the attraction that people have to appearances that cannot be fully explained by justifying the frame of reference or the context of meaning. "it is an adventure that animates". (Barthes 1981,19)

accumulated energies and qualities of the separate actants.

Bennett also extrapolates on the potentialities of isolated objects. For her, the power of objects, or thing-power, indicates a potential of separate, isolated things. Another force of individual things and beings is that they can allude to a fullness or a promise of some kind of fulfilment that is not evident or expressed in the thing itself; that is different or elsewhere. In this sense, things, objects and isolated beings can hold us in suspense.

In relation to art the idea that humans are always already related, even identical, with other materials and things is important. It points to how our bodies and minds can resonate with things when we feel involved with them or attracted to them. We know how something as amorphous and indecipherable as the shape or the quality of a thing can connect to other things or relate these to our own feelings. The idea is that we have an analogous intuitive understanding of how each actant in an assemblage has its own validity and propensity, likewise we understand that each object in an art-installation can change the artwork as a whole.

4.6 Harman and Bennett

Harman and Bennett both try to undo the subject-object binary. Their approaches and methods seem very different, if not mutually exclusive, as Harman would claim. In this paragraph their methods and definitions on autonomy and agency will be compared to spell out the differences between their approaches, and to see what the consequences of these differences are. For both theorists the idea that objects have an autonomous life of their own, outside of human consciousness is clear; the difference being that Harman presents the autonomy and the agency of objects in terms of absolute independence and separateness of any other object while Bennett's assemblages and actants have a relative independence, in which actants have an influence on the whole.

The two authors locate agency somewhere else: in Harman's ontology assemblages, unions and groups do not exist, only on a superficial level from which the real object withdraws. The sole agency Harman acknowledges is - as noted above - a sudden, unexpected movement or an eruption within a singular object. Withdrawing and revealing, holding the different qualities together and allure, can be called activities of real objects. The sensual qualities of objects on the other hand are open to various interactions, like fusing and merging. For Bennett agency refers to connecting, stimulating contact, conglomerating, resonating, commanding, attracting, compensating, persisting, changing, transforming and reinforcing. Added to this, Bennett also specifies thing-power as a potential of separate or agglomerated objects.

Both authors mention 'cuteness', for Bennett a quality that connects different bodies, for Harman it is a force that can draw one object into the vicinity of another.

Affect is an agency that relates to both authors as well: Harman mentions how in allure, a moment in which we can connect on a deeper level to one, singular object, humans are affected. Bennett claims that as all things, beings, objects and matrices of agglomerations are always already connected by the qualities and propensities of these matrices, bodies are constantly affected and affecting in many ways and on many levels, for instance the way the intestines can be affected by food that passed through them.

The two authors suggest that connections occupy different time frames: Bennett proposes a theory in which bodies and things, assemblages or groups of actants are never at rest and always on the lookout for new connections. Compared to Bennett, Harman's ontology seems quiet, withdrawn, where objects reside in silent reclusion. Apart from the realm of art in which, very briefly, a one-to-one connection takes place that he describes as an enigmatic moment.

Art is a space in which a confluence of thoughts of both theorists might be possible. At the same time the different notions on autonomy and agency by the two authors create the opportunity to

research artworks on many different levels. In the next chapter the works of Mark Leckey and David Bernstein will be probed by the definitions of both Harman and Bennett.

5.0 David Bernstein and Sanding with twisted grains

David Bernstein makes small objects, quasi-practical tools as it were, that are essentially non-useful. They are more analogous to art works. Bernstein generates associative stories that circle around the objects. These stories narrate expeditions in which Bernstein examines what objects want and what they are. He tries, in his own words, to think from the perspective of things and to think through, or via, or by way of things. In these stories Bernstein's quest and the object intertwine. Each time Bernstein thinks he understands the object it transforms or pops up in yet another story. There is never one story, never one truth; overlapping narratives play off of one another and build multiple truths for one object.

During a performance in Riga, called *Marble Man* (2015), David Bernstein narrated how he wanted to communicate with a spatula, yet it never talked back to him. In the next frame of the performance Bernstein encountered a small boy who was talking to a worry doll. The worry doll talked back to the boy, but it could only mirror or repeat the words people had told him, as it had no words of its own. As the story continued Bernstein enters a museum where people appear to want to scream but cannot produce any sound. During this performance Bernstein kept a spatula in his hand, the spatula was bent, looking, as it were backwards, towards Bernstein. The performance in Riga illustrates how Bernstein's performances cast doubt on the existence of things: if things don't communicate, one of the questions this throws up is whether or not objects exist independent of our minds? We are also left wondering if things can move in unanticipated ways (bend backwards). If that is the case, then perhaps we are completely wrong about the potentials and proficiencies of objects?



Fig. 0.1 Spatula's

The spatula is an object that recurs in his performances in different shapes. They are addressed in different ways: as incomprehensible objects, as tools to denote other objects, as things that indicate a change in the story or as things that receive an extra quality through the stories. In a short text that he wrote on spatula's together with Jurgis Paškevičius, called *Thinging* (2012), Bernstein explains how the interaction between him and objects evolves, during the making process and in his performances: "The spatula came from a therapy game called the spatula game from 20th century psychologist, Donald Winnicott. In it, a spatula is placed on a table in reach of a child. The child grabs it and starts to play. It starts to imagine the spatula transforming into something else, perhaps an airplane waved around in delight. Now that it sees an airplane, it can think of what an airplane

can do, it can think through the imagined thing. So the spatula allows us to both extend our body to reach further, but also to extend our mind further because we can now think through the thing” (2011, 2).

In the next paragraphs, Bernstein's performance *The Chair on its Side* will be analysed. We will also analyse several objects, both in the process of their making and as well as in their status as subjects or objects within Bernstein's performances.

5.1 *The Chair on its Side*

In the performance *The Chair on its Side* (2012), a chair changes and Bernstein follows its transformations. This is how one of the performances unfolded: Bernstein arranged the performance spectators around a chair. The chair was lying on its side on the floor with one leg extended and bent backwards connecting two legs of the chair diagonally. Bernstein was positioned beside the chair with a pointing stick; in fact a crooked rod that on one side was transformed into a spatula.



Fig. 0.2 *The Chair on its Side*

As part of his accompanying lecture, Bernstein spoke about his passion for chairs that he satisfied by reading extensively on chairs, and by going to the library to study design. Bernstein recounted how initially he was more interested in moving chairs around than actually making them. On an evening he sneaked into a classroom, mounted tables on top of each other and placed a chair on top. There he would look out of the window and over the city, seeing it as a giant playground in the dark that could be composed time and again. After flipping the chair around and putting it on its side where it got stuck, the chair, according to Bernstein, transformed into a person, which frightened him. To appease himself he linked this transformation to language: in language the word 'chair' functions as a synonym for human practice, for the chair of a company for example. Bernstein proceeded to put the chair or the person in a foetal position, as if in a deep sleep. That night he dreamt that the chair changed again and he painted it white and put it in a bed. In Bernstein's dream the chair resembled a wedding dress and he slept deeply and warm beside it. The dream reminded him of how the Asante, a Ghanaian tribe, link the soul of a person to a chair and use white colours to represent life. Thus Bernstein decided to paint the chair white to infuse it with life, but only partially; the artist did not want to cover over the chair's history. There was no paint on the actual chair that was lying on the floor at the end of the performance. Bernstein then asked the public to imagine a continuous white line, connecting the back leg of the chair to the front leg, and connecting it diagonally backwards, forming the letter 'G'.

In the performance the narrated chair was made distinct from the chair-like object on the floor. The chair on the floor did not flip around and was not painted white. Nobody could sit on the actual

chair-like object, yet in the story the artist did sit on the chair. Actual chair and story chair didn't coincide; they touched in various ways, sometimes overlapping and sometimes at odds. Yet somewhere between the actual and the narrated chair an indication of another object seemed to emerge, one with no actual contours or substance; one beneath or above the threshold of the difference between narrated chair and real chair, an object/image one could call a third chair.

5.2 Bernstein's objects and Harman

Bernstein grinds and sands his objects for days in a row in order to discover or lay bare their fundamental layers, and it is these fundamental layers that he believes are able to carry and elicit stories.⁶ Often Bernstein starts from an existing thing, a tool or a wooden sculpture or a door-handle. Something like this can lie for weeks or months in his house or studio because he knows there is something within them that he cannot define. This can relate, in Harman's terms, to the mysterious depth of a being or, in Bennett's words, to the force of an individual thing that holds us in suspense as it alludes to a fullness that is elsewhere.

When Bernstein is able to imagine the beginning of a story, he starts grinding and sanding the object until under layers of (saw) dust a hybrid object 'appears'. Constructing the story runs parallel to the sanding: they become together. I want to proceed by (1) looking first at Bernstein's objects from Harman's theoretical perspective before going on to (2) elaborate on Harman's reading of Heidegger's tool-theory that focuses on solitary, dysfunctional objects. I will conclude by holding Bernstein's art works up to the foil of the theories of Jane Bennett on autonomy, agency and assemblages.

(1) Bernstein's objects can fit alternatively into one's hand, constitute or outline the shapes of a hand, or express the pressure that a hand must have put on the object. By sanding Bernstein not only separates the object from its functions, he also dissolves its sensual qualities. The objects come up smooth and come into view as not particularly noticeable or noteworthy. However on closer inspection they appear enigmatic; they often resemble two or more different kinds of tools or shapes at the same time, joined together. While *The Chair on its Side* only had an extended leg, Bernstein's objects often give the impression of two things born together, like Siamese twins. Just as Siamese twins are enigmatic as one tries to imagine where one begins and the other ends, Bernstein's objects as well attract attention to their mesmerizing constitution, and to the entangled outer limits of their contributing parts. The original thing shines through the new one in an uncomfortable way: they appear unwilling to become a whole. If one tries to follow the curves of the *Spatula I* in the picture below, one cannot separate the original spatula from the wooden, twisted, shape under it. This shape forces the spatula to bend forward where it joins a structure that looks like a comb or a rake, in which it is encased. Are we looking at a spatula or at a shape that resembles a rake in which features and qualities of both merge?

According to Harman only the sensual qualities of an object can merge or fuse. Yet while some of the distinct characteristics of *Spatula I* have disappeared the object still has a sensual quality, for instance its curves and its smooth outer surface. These sensual qualities however do not seem to belong to the original object; they belong to the new hybrid object. One can conclude, in Harman's terms, that within the original objects a split has taken place between the real objects and their sensual qualities. But if the new hybrid object exists as a whole and if it has sensual qualities, what is

⁶ In 2017 David Bernstein and I set up a workshop with three other artists. In these meetings we discussed our ways of working and we tried to define how objects and things shape our practice. Furthermore I have collaborated with him two times in artistic projects as well. As a result I know his thinking and ways of working quite well. Therefore I will refer to not only to his works but also to his thinking in this thesis.

it 'doing'? It feels like it is more than just a physical interconnection between two objects; the assembly also takes place at a more poetic level. Harman offers metaphor as an artistic means of bridging the gap between real objects. As in metaphor, traits of one object are drawn into the orbit of another object. The object is now free of its sensual qualities and physical restraints and consequently it can function as a soul that animates the other object from within. In *Spatula I* it seems that the rake animates the original spatula, by emphasizing qualities like scraping and collecting. At the same time, in bending forward, the spatula expresses a submissive attitude, yet under the sign of a constant tension. This tension can be ascribed to the wooden material and Bernstein's sanding, yet this tension appears also as an inherent part of *Spatula I*; as such the object has its own, autonomous application and task. At the same time it is still enigmatic, as we still cannot comprehend the object as a whole. As such the dynamics of hiding and revealing are at work within the object and it seems probable that Bernstein anticipates these forces. We get the sense that Bernstein wants to explore the hidden aspects of objects and at the same time he hides them by merging them with other objects. In short, *Spatula I* appears to be an autonomous object with a real being that comes to the fore through metaphor, and that expresses itself through forces like merging, hiding and revealing.



Fig. 0.3 Spatula I



Fig. 0.4 Spatula 2

In his performances Bernstein talks about what his objects do and how he likes to talk to them. Apparently they represent autonomous beings for him, beings that have a life and an agency of their

own. The artist almost never refers to the actual objects on the floor or in his hands during the performances. As the objects in his stories constantly transform, one can suppose that the object that Bernstein addresses can be located somewhere in-between the physical and the narrated object, an object that comes into being in one's mind during the performance.

(2) Harman's elaborations on Heidegger's tool theory can be helpful in understanding Bernstein's performance-objects as they refer to images of the mind and less to actual shapes: Harman explains that Heidegger's broken hammer represents a unified whole that occupies space and gravity, containing all its features in a single, present moment. Referring to objects Harman specifies that this present moment plays out in our minds, as we, as Harman puts it "experience a negation of their accessible contours and become aware that the object exceeds all that we can grasp of it" (2007, 193). As Bernstein's mind-objects travel between actual things and stories they become more ungraspable and more enigmatic than the physical objects they are as well, and as such they may become more like the real objects in Harman's sense of evading all that we can grasp of them.

Nonetheless, Harman's theory appears to be insufficiently equipped for probing further into performance-works like those of Bernstein. Too many relevant and meaningful connections between objects and mutations of those same objects seem to fall through the mesh of Harman's theory in art-works like those of Bernstein. Those connections, pregnant with meaning on the existence of objects, come up as not relevant from Harman's point of view. This under complexity in Harman's perspective results from how he locates connections exclusively within the sensual sphere. Moreover, the examples Harman offers for understanding allure in art works such as poetic metaphor, beauty and cuteness cannot explain the full range and diversity of connections thrown up by Bernstein's performances.

If one looks past the individual connections in Bernstein's performances, there is the performance that as a whole influences physical objects. We see this in *The Chair on its Side* where the physical chair disintegrates from the imaginary chair. This disintegration can relate to the moment of allure, and it is a short-lived moment. Bernstein explained that he anticipates the moment of a performance intensely in all the long preparatory hours of sanding. At the same time, throughout Bernstein's performances nobody and nothing moves, neither public, nor the object, nor the artist. All these elements can create an unmoving, muted sense of an exploration or a search for something deep within, a move into imaginary territories, which resonates with Harman's approach on the real beings of objects.

5.3 Bernstein's performances and Bennett

From Bennett's perspective the performances represent autonomous assemblages consisting of hybrid objects, together with stories in which the artist tries to find out what these objects are while conversing with his public. Sometimes Bernstein narrates how he creates the shapes, so that the public can follow the process of how these objects were made. In the stories that accompany the presentation of these objects, these elements together with different spaces and times, of past, present and future are brought together. The whole and its details are almost never completely comprehensible, and while the performance stops at a certain point, the imagined object, or mind-object, continues hovering somewhere in between the actual object and the story. If one can ascribe a unity to the performance, then this imagined object holds the strings to all the stories around it, and to the actual object in space, even to how it is made.

The stories that go together with any one of these objects, the way they travel through our minds, how they connect as narratives with the physical object they correspond to, how they involve the materials and even the making of the object and how, in the narrative, human traits can be found in the inert or the inorganic; all these elements refer to a living whole. Without the stories the physical objects would be tiny and unnoticeable, though through the stories

that go with them they gain weight, they grow. The stories without the physical object can be enticing, but they would miss the visual component. The mind-object becomes alive as it has to travel back and forth between the real physical and the narrative realm; it keeps changing and it has no fixed contours. This adds to the notion that assemblages can comprise elements that are not harmoniously integrated; indeed, Bernstein's works are a good example of the vitality of assemblages that have to change.

Bennett's theory appears to be constructive in probing into Bernstein's performances. It can bring agencies to the fore that Harman's vision does not acknowledge, like growing, changing and connecting. Bennett's viewpoint does help illuminate the liveliness within Bernstein's performances as one of their main characteristics is that they keep changing. Bennett's assemblages are vibrant wholes, consisting of complex connections. In that sense the more extensive and more complex Bernstein's performances are, the more they would construct something stronger than the separate things or actants that constitute them. Bennett's approach on autonomy explains why the performance as a whole is a thriving mechanism that has no fixed end.

5.4 Bernstein's works between Harman and Bennett

When looking at Bernstein's performances through the lenses of two different theories, the forces at work within the artwork seem to change. When we observe the work from Harman's perspective the search for a real being within a work that consists of complex connections between different objects and narratives can appear problematic. Yet the mind-object emerges from the performance as an ungraspable being. In that sense Harman's notion on the autonomous object can be exemplified by this only roughly defined, unified thing that exists somewhere in the mind. The objects outside the performances appear to be autonomous objects in the sense of Harman, with real beings that come to the fore through metaphor, and that express themselves through forces like merging, hiding and revealing.

Once we observe Bernstein's work from Bennett's perspective, the performance, the object, the story and Bernstein himself immediately intermingle. The whole becomes a lively collaboration. The imaginary object functions as an anchor to which all lines can stretch out: stories, mutations or transformations and even the artist's voice. All elements become more transparent as their manifold connections are freed up. All components and their corresponding actions can influence the performance with an equivalent impact. This viewpoint requires from the public an attitude of receptivity and alertness to all possible connections; to the furnishing of the space or to their own skin or inner physiologies. It feels like Bernstein's performances generate themselves: any new insight, any new location of the performance or new object can change the whole.

Bernstein's artworks can demonstrate the singular and separatist theory of Harman, in terms of hiding and revealing, but this theory cannot explain the manifold relations in Bernstein's work. By referring to allure, the performance as a whole can be seen as a force that separates the physical object from its qualities. In that moment the real object emerges as an image of the mind. The looser and more manifold connections that Bernstein summons in his work are better described and explained in terms of the diverse actants and forces of Bennett's theories. All forces together create a field of tensions and possibilities that lead to the unveiling of one singular object that has positioned itself somewhere out of reach.

6.0 The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things

The British artist Mark Leckey gave a lecture in 2013 at the R(oyal) C(ollege) of A(rt) in London on his show *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things* (2013). In this lecture Leckey explained how he tried to explore network and assemblage theories while working on this show.

Mark Leckey is a fervent collector of huge amounts of digital pictures of strange and remarkable objects and artefacts, belonging to different times and various cultures. In 2013, the Southbank Centre invited Leckey to select two hundred pictures from his laptop for the Hayward Touring Shows. The Hayward took it upon them to complete the task of actually finding these objects and bringing them together for the exhibition. Leckey was then given the freedom to use the collection in any way he liked. When Leckey started receiving the objects, he reported how he had the impression that the individual, separate objects seemed more 'alive' on the screen of his laptop than in real life in his studio. Leckey, who is interested in the idea that assemblages can generate power and life, experimented by juxtaposing, manipulating and digitalizing the objects. He tried various combinations in his assemblages that went on within the exhibitions - first in London - and then in a number of different countries. In every museum or gallery he exhibited in, Leckey would set up differently arranged and constituted assemblages, to reanimate the objects and bring them to life again.

The objects in the show originated from different eras and different contexts; most of them consisting of existing autonomous artworks that were never intended to connect to other objects. Leckey wanted to group them in big, living animated assemblages. Though he tried to connect up his work to network theories, the possibility that the objects in this project can also be looked at from the viewpoint of Harman's theory should not be excluded. In fact Leckey's artworks pose a challenge to interpret them from Harman's perspective as each object in the project can be seen as part of a group, but simultaneously as isolated from it, raised up separately on plinths or on platforms. In order to find out how Leckey's work can be seen from the perspective of network theories, his lecture and work will be explored first from the viewpoint of the theories of Jane Bennett before going on to analyse them from the perspective of Harman's ontology

6.1 Internet of Things and animated objects

The title of the exhibition is associated with the term the Internet of Things, or IoT; a concept in computing that defines a network of everyday, electronic objects communicating with one another.⁷ One can think of physical devices such as vehicles, tooth brushes and refrigerators wrapped up with electronics, sensors, and Internet access, which enable these objects to exchange data. Each thing in the IoT has agency, as it is able to interoperate within and influence the existing Internet infrastructure. Ideally the IoT creates opportunities for a more or less direct integration of the physical world into computer-based systems, one can think here of smart cities, smart homes and smart grids.

Leckey's main guideline for the show was his belief that the more technology evolves, the further our minds fall back to the fabrications of a more ancient, superstitious mind-set, in which people animate objects and embody them with mysterious powers. We are left asking what separates our present, in which cars talk to us, phones give us directions and websites predict what we desire, from our ancient past, when magical qualities were bestowed on stones, animals and plants conveying mystical meanings? The title: *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things* refers not only to the activating of the inanimate but also to contacting 'dumb' things. Leckey explains that once dumb things become contactable, they can begin to tell us what we don't yet know. As soon as we enter into a relation with these man-made artefacts, we are immersed in an animated world.

⁷ The term "the Internet of things" was coined by Kevin Ashton of Procter & Gamble, later MIT's Auto-ID Center, in 1999.

The show then refers not only to the (technological) activation of inanimate things, but, according to Leckey, also brings us back to “that kind of thinking in which everything is animated, that throws you back to something much more archaic, like a dreamtime, or a kind of animistic worldview where everything is imbued with a soul, trees, rocks, stones, foxes” (2013, 00.31.00). Ultimately, Leckey says, it is about being in constant communication with every aspect of one’s environment. This again resonates with Bennett’s elaborations on deep ecology and her interest in the out-side that is in-side as well.

6.2 The exhibition; an impression

Leckey’s show spreads out over several spaces. In each space the walls are painted in one specific colour: giving a blue, green, black, white and brown space. The show appears as any conventional museum setting in which sculptures and objects are put on plinths or platforms and each object can be perceived in its own light and space. The exhibition is loosely arranged in five categories: man/bodies, including angels and monsters, animals, including mummies, fossils and machines, circuitry, and scientific and medical devices. The choice of objects appears intuitive; they are gathered from the broadest of areas, almost as if the exhibition has been curated by means of a Google image search. There are: maps, car models, digital projections, historic artefacts and visionary machines, sculptures, x-rays, medieval relics, contemporary artworks, prints, drawings together with objects like action figures, accompanied by electronic sounds. It seems at first sight that there may be no intelligible connections between the separate elements, and the whole appears too complex to unite either in one concept or in of the categories. After closer and longer inspection we begin to notice how the inconsistent cacophony gradually reveals connections between things.

6.3 Leckey’s Exhibition and Bennett

We will look first at the exhibition from the perspective of Bennett’s assemblages, while focusing on the audio-visual interactions within the green space. Bennett does not elaborate on audio-visual connections at all in her book, yet in her lecture she elaborates on how the human body relates to the non-human in an intercorporeal way: humans understand non-human things and can feel bonds or affections. In Leckey’s show analogies can be found though they may not seem striking at first sight: all objects are exhibited on plinths, thus they seem separated. Yet there is an uncanny cacophony of strange sounds to be heard, an accumulation of the shrieks of an animal with the low moan of a human. They seem to emanate from the room in its entirety, or from its insides. These sounds not only reverberate with the physical body of the visitor, they also direct the attention to other physical elements in this space that seem to belong to humans. We will attempt to discover the intercorporeal connections between these objects, as mentioned in Bennett’s lecture, and to look at the assembly as a whole.

Many of the objects represent human limbs or internal organs. In front of a wall we see Herman Makkink’s white ceramic *Rocking Machine* (1969), notorious for a disconcerting scene in Stanley Kubrick’s film *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). The *Rocking Machine* is placed in front of a white ceramic shoe, standing on its toes. In this way, both emphasize their ability and willingness to move or to rock. In *A Clockwork Orange* a perpetrator pounds the *Rocking Machine* in the mouth of a woman and thus kills her. On one of the green walls a green ball is protruding, as if pushed from behind the wall while on the opposite wall a painting of a brown ball with a black hole in the middle, maybe an eye, is staring at it. The green ball could jump out of the wall straight into the black hole or eye. On a plinth stands an 800-year-old stone *Singing Gargoyle* with an open mouth. These objects and the *Rocking Machine* all connect to the intrusive and deadly act in *A Clockwork Orange* as

they expose mechanical interactions; there are many holes; holes of mouths, eyes, a tear in an eye, the eye in a round ball and there are objects that protrude, small, organic objects like the 'branch' of the intestines, two arms on an uterus vase and the round green ball coming out of the green wall. These forms seem to be able to close and open, to inflate and deflate, and as such they are deemed to react on the on-going sounds of humans and animals, turning the room into a big breathing, moaning machine. There is another object that connects to the sounds: on the wall an object hangs that looks like fossilized intestines, from a sculpture by Jim Shaw; *Dream Object*. The text that accompanies this piece in the catalogue of the exhibition, explains the word gastromancy as "speaking from the stomach", "The noises produced by the stomach were thought to be voices of the dead, who had taken up residency in the stomach of the ventriloquist, who would interpret the sounds. It was believed that he or she was able to speak to the non-living, as well as foretell the future" (Leckey, 2013, 13).

The exhibition also contains objects and artefacts that could be construed as conveying a will to live in the indeterminate state between life and death: one of the 'arms' of the intestines is set up in a reaching up position with two 'fingers' protruding in the air, at once oddly and paradoxically both active and inert. The mouth of the gargoyle is set as if starting to sing, yet both objects are paralyzed and fixed in time. Bennett's hoarders like stones, as they are patient and they won't die: the *Singing Gargoyle* and the intestines are patient as well as they are forever ready to start, just like the *Rocking Machine*. The intestines and the gargoyle are fabricated from materials that invoke fossil and archaic periods and that can allude to this indeterminate state between death and life.

All objects signal to each other: death, (mechanical) lust, invasions by other bodies and irony. Signalling is not mentioned nor by Harman neither by Bennett as an agency, but in the arts it performs an important function. The objects demonstrate propensities that Bennett suggests in her lecture on hoarders, like those of flexible contours, of affect or the openness to resonate with the qualities of other bodies.



Fig. 0.5 The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things

The links between the objects and artefacts on display traverse the space in different directions. This also goes for futuristic artefacts, like the helmet of the cyber man. Its original design is from the seventh series in the British science fiction television series *Doctor Who*, entitled: *The Wheel in Space* (1968). The *Cyberman* helmet is the first to introduce a 'tear drop' design, with a tear in each of the eye sockets of the helmet. This human tear does not, however, protrude from the eye sockets; it is

carved out, it has gone missing so to speak, and left a square hole under the eye. The link with the *Rocking Machine* is not only its futuristic attire but also the mechanical metamorphoses of human emotions and biological functioning, and the suggested lack thereof. On the other hand the carved out tear links to the hole in the eye of the painting and the open mouth of the gargoyle.

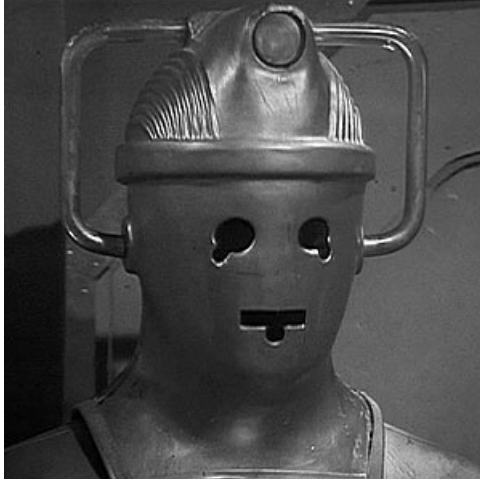


Fig. 0.6 Cyber man helmet of *The Wheel in Space*

Another recurrent characteristic throughout the whole exhibition is the manipulation of forms and artworks by their exposure to different media.⁸ This, together with the connections with other objects throughout the space, instills the feeling that things, though they are mounted on plinths or hanging on walls, continue to transform and signal different energies and messages to each other.



Fig. 0.7 *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things*

⁸ In one of the other spaces there are for instance two versions of *La Grande Verre* of Marcel Duchamp: one is an animation and the other an illustration of Duchamp while working at *La Grande Verre*.

What forces make this installation 'alive'? Can we look at this through the lens of Bennett's elaborations on conative bodies that change and thus have a life of their own?

Mostly artists decide at one point that a show is ready, after that it should not alter anymore. Yet Leckey experimented a lot by transforming the settings all the time while the show was travelling. While it is not possible to check if the show has been growing in strength, Leckey's interventions proved that the show allowed for changes. Leckey's interest in IoT inspired him to combine the technical and the mechanical with the barbaric or the archaic. This allowed him to create connections through history, linking things by their meanings and their visual languages, while literally animating them through technical input (the sounds). The way the objects connect resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's notions on assemblages: the combination of objects and sounds emphasizes exchangeability, and multiple functionalities. All objects have an influence: without the *Rocking Machine* one would perhaps not connect the protruding ball to the eye in the painting.

As in the work of Bernstein, the notion of time plays a different, but an inherent role; only by staying long enough does the work show its secrets and becomes more complex and unified. In Bernstein's performances, the notion of time belongs to one specific moment, in Leckey's work a certain endlessness with regard to the making and extensive periods spent visiting the work are needed to co-create the vital assemblage.

At the same time there is enough space around each object to observe it outside of all interconnections. The space between the objects speaks of vicinity more than of direct contact; visitors can change their perspective, they can go back and forth, alternating between the idea of an assemblage and an individual thing.

6.4 Harman's autonomous objects and Leckey

In his writings Harman speaks against assemblages, as they leave no space for the individual real object. We will observe what the objects in Leckey's show do and how we can define their autonomy, by looking through the lens of Harman's theories.

Though one would suspect that in the project the individual artefact would become less important than the show as a whole, many objects seem to have a higher profile in the installation, being very much on their own. Their makers intended most of the artworks to figure as autonomous artworks. Yet in Harman's vision a real object withdraws once it comes into contact with another object, leaving the object reduced to a caricature by the qualities of the other object. Then the question comes forward: can an autonomous artwork exist in connection to other works or will they be influenced by the other artworks?

The connections between the objects seen from the perspective of 'closing and opening' demand our attention, also because of the pounding sounds. In this framework the physical functioning of the objects dominates like the *Singing Gargoyle* that now only opens its mouth, or the ball is only protruding from the wall. In this perspective nothing is hidden or revealed. On the other hand individual objects attract attention as well, for instance the gargoyle appears quite mesmerizing; with its cute round face and open month, expressing a youthful hopefulness while the weathered stone seems to refer to antiquity. Because it is made of stone, it keeps opening its mouth, it thus not only refers to antiquity, it 'is' from an ancient (stone) past. It is difficult to gather its qualities together: if one focuses on its youthfulness, its ancient past disappears and vice versa. Maybe because the gargoyle is enigmatic one feels inclined to look beyond the total sum of its qualities and therefore one searches for something that is hidden. Allure denotes the moment when the different qualities connect and one gets a glimpse of the entire gargoyle. In that sense hiding and revealing as well as allure continues unabated throughout the exhibition.

Does this imply that the other objects do not caricature the *Singing Gargoyle*, even though

they are in close proximity? In the first place all objects are standing on plinths or hanging on the walls; this separation through the museum's design is a means to view each artwork as an individual object. In the second place there is enough space between the objects that gives us room to understand the objects as separate. While this may help to guarantee some privacy for the objects, this does not protect an object to an invasion of some sort, this is also why curators spend a lot of time on installing exhibitions. Going back to the gargoyle and to the way it gathers different qualities together a distinction can be made: while some of its aesthetics resemble those of other objects, none of the other objects combines its qualities in its specific way. For instance *The Rocking Machine* ties qualities together like the sexual act and balancing, yet 'balancing' does not resonate with the gargoyle. Perhaps because both objects are enigmatic in the way they connect qualities and in their own sense of hiding and revealing, they appear separate.

(In fact it lies beyond the scope of this thesis to delve into the issue - interesting as it might be - of exploring whether artworks are more susceptible to being influenced by other artworks or by other non-aesthetic objects, analysed from the perspective of both authors.)

Even though the connections can form a hindrance to noticing the dynamics of withdrawal and revealing in the individual artworks on view in the exhibition, they are still at work. Perhaps because of the plinths and because of the choice of objects, the individual artworks can still be seen as separated from each other. By looking from Harman's perspective one can investigate the dynamics of hiding and revealing, along with forces like allure as they apply to individual objects on show in the exhibition. Together with Harman's approaches on caricaturing, these notions seem to create very useful tools to investigate when and how art-objects influence each other.

6.5 Harman, Bennett and Leckey

Leckey staged an exhibition in which he put objects on pedestals allowing the public to see them as separated from each other and at the same time making it possible to see the whole exhibition as one huge network. The objects affect each other in many ways, and to different degrees. It seems as if some objects, like artworks, are less sensitive to intrusions or affects by other objects.

All agencies that Bennett describes in her assemblages can be found in the ever more intricate and complex bonds of the exhibition. The viewer who experiences the different bonds may realize that they may never work together harmoniously, which is again a characteristic of a vital assemblage. Leckey had to re-assemble a lot in order to make and keep all ties and connections alive on his exhibition. While Leckey acted upon the visual qualities and meanings of each individual object, the assemblage as a whole could never be neglected. It is conceivable to see Leckey not only as the maker and creator of the exhibition, but also as an integrated part of the whole; just like the viewers who have to spend time reflecting on what is exhibited in order to recognize and identify the different connections and actants.

Harman does not want to connect his thinking to relational theories, as individual real objects will withdraw and be reduced to caricatures within the relation. In that sense the animated qualities of an object can hide or caricature another aspect of yet another object. It appears that in Leckey's show withdrawing, revealing and allure continue throughout the show. Sudden eruptions or moves, the sole agencies of the real object according to Harman, cannot be discovered within this show. Harman's notions on caricaturing can be useful tools in devising art-exhibitions in which each individual artwork has to stand out.

7.0 Conclusion

For this thesis I researched artworks and theories to discover and lay bare notions of agency and autonomy in artworks, in order to come up with a vocabulary for visual artists.

Harman and Bennett are two authors who can be categorized within the material turn. They both demonstrate the autonomous life and agency of objects or things that often lie outside of human consciousness. Nonetheless, these authors have two very different approaches.

For this thesis I researched two case studies of artists, with a selection of their works, through the notions of autonomy and agency of the two authors. In analysing the works of the artists Bernstein and Leckey it became clear that their works can be investigated from the perspective of connectivity and at the same time from the perspective of separateness and withdrawal. By exploring the artworks by both viewpoints, it appeared that more insights were generated in what artworks do and in how they relate to other artworks or other things.

I will summarize the agencies that came to the fore:

Bernstein's works were first analysed by using Harman's approach on the notions of agency and autonomy. In Bernstein's objects the game of hiding and revealing plays a role; or, in Harman's terms: the objects show glimpses of themselves in the moment of revealing. The sensual qualities of objects can fuse or merge with those of other objects. In Bernstein's performances the physical object seems to slowly disconnect itself from the story and this gives rise to an imagined object that can be situated somewhere between story and physical object. We can then justifiably claim that this imagined, or real, object has split off from its sensual qualities. This example supports Harman's understanding of the concept of allure.

Next the same artworks were analysed from Jane Bennett's perspective. Bernstein's objects connect to stories, other objects and human beings in the performances. In that sense his objects are 'open to infiltration'; they modify and they are modified. Within the making and the execution of the performances there is a distributive agency spread among the maker, the objects and the stories. The performance as a whole has autonomy as it develops seemingly on its own, and each actant has the capacity to make a difference.

It seemed most appropriate to analyse Leckey's work through the theories of Bennett, because his works are based on the idea of vital networks in which each actant comes alive. In Leckey's show the objects not only connect to other objects, but also to sound, moving images and histories, as well as to the signs of other objects and to their qualities. The objects have an energetic pulse that is slightly 'off', in Bennett's words, from that exuded by the assemblage, therefore the project as a whole had to change continuously. According to Leckey, he 'had' to change the setting each time, referring to how the objects and the show were in charge of him. The project presents itself as an autonomous whole in which different energies and connections confound the project from within, as a conative body that has to change in order to grow.

From Harman's perspective the individual objects can be seen as autonomous: they do not connect physically and they seem to be able to withstand the caricaturisation by other objects. Apparently the real objects did not have to withdraw from the infiltration by other objects, and are thus able to animate their sensual qualities from within.

By researching the case studies it occurred to me that both theories became alternatively complementary and even sometimes similar within the works analysed. In researching the case studies new agencies came to the fore that could connect to both authors; an example being the act of signalling. For Bennett signalling would be something 'good', as it is an agency that can connect things. For Harman on the other hand, signalling could be interpreted as an action that

forces an object to withdraw from another signalling object. Mediating is a force that relates to Bennett's description of how an object intervenes between actants, while Harman calls one object that challenges another to lose a measure of its defence an animus. Thus the two terms do not have exactly the same meaning but they come close. There are also agencies that are mentioned by the two authors in different theoretical frameworks and in different terms, yet they can refer to the same dynamics within an artwork. For instance Bennett's 'force of an individual thing that holds us in suspense as it alludes to a fullness that is elsewhere' can refer to the imaginary object in Bernstein's work, while Harman's term allure attracts the attention to its invisible, real being. This real being, together with its sensual qualities, form the entire being, which resonates with fullness.

While looking at either artwork from the perspective of only one theorist, the artworks become lopsided. For instance when looking at Bernstein's objects and performances from the perspective of Harman's theories, hiding and revealing and allure appear to be the most important forces at work. The idea that in Bernstein's performances the physical object slowly distances itself and a new object arises in the mind can demonstrate a remarkable form of allure. However, observing the performances from Bennett's perspective allows us to see the objects as flexible beings that are being affected and that affect Bernstein as well. The performances create an imaginary being that is more than its own visible, physical traits, that is more alive and rich.

There are other notions in Bennett's theories that add to understanding agency in Bernstein's work, for instance transformation. Harman indicates how an object can suddenly move or erupt; yet this agency does not necessarily induce a transformation. Bennett mentions manifold changes and transformations that come into being through relations. Though allure may explain a lot of actions within Bernstein's performances, it feels like a loss to neglect Bennett's interactions and only focus on the one and real object.

This lop-sidedness can also be felt when focusing on autonomy in Bernstein's works. One can observe the physical object as an autonomous being, outside of its relations to the stories. It stays on the floor or in the artist's hands when the performance is over; it has not changed, perhaps it has become a bit distant or empty. This in contrast to the imaginary object in our minds that has transformed throughout; it has connected to the story, to other objects and people, as well as to Bernstein himself. At the same time its contours are less clear and its sensual qualities have evaporated, yet it appears coherent and deep. As such it appears more like the real object in Harman's terms. Yet this 'split' in Harman's terms has happened because of its connections within the performance, so in fact Bennett's ideas on connection and change help in understanding how the real object reveals itself in Bernstein's performances.

The lop-sidedness of only observing a work through the lens of one theorist would affect the work of Leckey as well. It is clear that Leckey tried to explore the possibilities of agency in the objects, by animating the show with sounds and by juxtaposing them to other objects. They relate in many ways as they emit signs, colours and material aspects, and they mutually suggest movement to each other. The objects in his work can connect to the qualities of one another. The show as a whole has an agency of its own, a power that seems very much alive. Yet, the individual objects can withdraw as well; they appear to have an enhanced capacity to exist outside the audio-visual context of the show; they do not simply fuse with the sensual qualities of other objects and each individual object can hold its qualities together - as Harman would put it. Thus while it seems obvious to think in terms of relationships regarding Leckey's work, the individual objects as well need to be addressed in terms of their own autonomy. The *Singing Gargoyle* is an autonomous object. It is not a human being, it is not just a historical artefact; it is also an enigmatic and autonomous being in its own right that has survived history. Perhaps it has had to endure an endless string of museums, explanations, fellow artefacts and objects, landscapes and hands, yet it remained this particular being that issues its call to become absorbed in it, in Harman's words. These observations resonate with what Bennett refers to as 'alluding to a fullness somewhere else'; this fullness lures us even closer in to a proximity with it.

Except for Harman's notions of the sudden erupting of a real object, an agency that did not come to the fore in the case-studies, all other agencies and forces mentioned in this thesis point towards a relation or separation, either of the sensual, the real or parts of a body or an object. In viewing the works only through the lens of one theory the artwork becomes lopsided and loses part of its power. By including both theories the artworks appear immeasurably more interesting, powerful, complex and rich.

7.1 Recommendation

I can recommend combining the approaches of both authors when exploring how artworks influence each other in art-exhibitions; which can lead to further insights in museum design. Both theories can also be relevant in exploring what impact common objects have on art-objects within art installations.

There is an omission in the list of agencies as defined by both theorists that I find important to mention. It is often said that at a certain moment in the making, the artist is not the only maker of the work; he has to collaborate with the artwork and finally even follow its commands. It is an agency that does not come to the fore in observing the finished artwork. Both Bernstein and Leckey refer to this in their explanations of their works. For Bernstein the performance as a whole urges him to become a participant in the stories and thus in the service of the artwork. For Leckey it means that he has to change the setting in each new exhibition-space. Though Bennett mentions diverse actants that co-created in the writing of her book, neither theorist mentions how artworks can command the artist to take specific steps to further change or develop the object itself. Tim Ingold who investigated the making of artworks in his book *Making* does not refer to this agency either (2013). I recommend researching this agency in the future as it can lead to further insights in the notions of agency and autonomy in artworks.

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