

Denver New Materialist Group Newsletter

Issue No. 1 Fall 2019

Community News

Welcome to our first quarterly issue of the Denver New Materialist Group newsletter! This quarterly newsletter provides information about events, news, and publications by and for community members. We are launching our first member blog and interview in this issue and hope to include guest blogs and interviews in the future— suggestions are welcome for the January 2020 issue! We also welcome non-textual contributions such as images and links to sound and/or video files. Our goal is to build our community and relationships through activities that further our understanding of these emerging theories. Our group is diverse and we hope to showcase the variety of interests that members are pursuing. Eventually, this information will be housed in our redesigned website (coming this fall) where we hope to create relationships with like-minded groups around the world. To this end, please send us any information you would like to share for the January 2020 issue. We have several events on the calendar that are hosted by members or are reflective of new materialisms, including a tour of the Colorado School of Mines educational mine in Idaho Springs. This unique day trip is a chance to see where and how the resources for our material world emerge— hope to see you soon!

Calendar of Events Fall 2019

Friday 10/11: Selections from *Voices from the Drum: An Osage Collection*, presented in conjunction with the Osage Nation Foundation. 5 to 7 p.m. Sturm Hall, Museum of Anthropology Gallery, Room 102.

Saturday 10/12: *SGaawaay K'uuna* (Edge of the Knife) Film Screening 7 to 9:30 p.m., reception at 6:15 p.m. Davis Auditorium, Lower Level (screening), Museum of Anthropology Gallery, Room 102 (reception).

Monday 10/14 2pm: Erin Manning roundtable with Molly Kugel, Taylor Muma, and Alison Turner at Chambers Center Garden Room (190)

Tuesday 10/15 6pm: Keynote Presentation with Erin Manning: "Not at a Distance: On Touch, Synaesthesia, and Other Ways of Knowing" at Craig Hall, Boettcher Foundation Community Room

Monday 10/28 2pm: Making Media Matter Roundtable with Bonnie Clark, Johanna Drucker, Esteban Gomez, and Heidi Ippolito at Sturm Hall, Room 495

Tuesday 10/29 11am: Keynote Presentation with Johanna Drucker: "Graphic and Programmatic: Writing Protocols" at Craig Hall, Boettcher Foundation Community Room

Thursday November 7 12:30-3pm: Trip to Colorado School of Mines educational mine in Idaho Springs.
Please RSVP to Katherine by October 31st if you want to attend (Katherine.robert@du.edu).

Upcoming New Materialist Classes

Winter 2020: "Marxism" with a new materialist perspective by Thomas Nail. PHIL/ECON cross listed.

Recent Publications by Members

Nail, T. (2019). *Theory of the Image*. New York City: Oxford.

Reid, Pauline. *Reading by Design: The Visual Interfaces of the English Renaissance Book* (U Toronto P, April 2019)

Stott, Annette. "Personhood and Agency: A Theoretical Approach to Gravemarkers in Mainstream American Cemeteries." *Markers XXXV* (2019): 46-81.

Thomas Nail blogs: philosophyofmovementblog.com and du.academia.edu/thomasnail

Community Member Blog by Adam Loch

The Making Media Matter (MMM) Symposium at DU this summer (July 25-26, 2019) was exemplary of a transdisciplinary effort to share methods, develop critical thinking, and experiment with novel ways of working with media. Daily presentations were followed with a panel discussion and hands-on workshop that invited participants to create. The first day's theme "Immersive Media Experiences" involved a wide range of contributions that challenged the boundaries between real and imagined worlds. The second day's theme "Cognitive Estrangement Through Media" defamiliarized the familiar and explored how the otherworldly might be accessed through different media. Using a multiplicity of entry points to explore in what ways media matters (figuratively *and* literally), the MMM Symposium brought together a variety of disciplines and workshop activities that allowed for collaborative creativity between presenters and participants alike.

One entry point into why media matters I found particularly useful was artist Kate Casanova's presentation "Liminal Bodies: Posthuman Sculpture & Video". Kate shared a series of photos from an exhibit in which she turned tubular rubbish into life-like alien entities, using derelict materials as a strategy for conceiving posthumanism. Hybridity, porousness, co-production of subjectivity in relation to the use of technologies, and bodily sensation as opposed to conscious thought were recurrent throughout the presentations. Another theme that emerged in conversation with Ka Chun Yu's presentation "A Brief History of Immersive Experiences Before Computers" was the tension between control and vulnerability and how losing one's sense of self in the creative process or an immersive experience can open space for creating otherwise unthinkable solutions.

The daily workshops following the panel discussions intensified the experience of the Symposium as participants were encouraged to put emergent themes into action. The "Design Thinking Works! Workshop" on the first day with Dan Griner and Amy Kern invited participants to collaborate in groups and design a library, teasing the creative process out as one of improvisation, experimentation, and iterative adjustments. On the second day in the "Wearable Interactivity Workshop" with Ben Stewart and Ginger Leigh, participants were provided textile materials and invited to make their own wearable gear to hold their phone and program smartphone sensors to correspond with certain movements and effects. In addition to the presentations and workshops, each day was capped off with an audiovisual performance such as the immersive full-dome experience performed by Synthestruct (Ginger Leigh) at the Gates Planetarium at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science and a spatial music composition based on astronomical data with Monica Bolles. Altogether the Making Media Matter Symposium this summer served as a venue for transdisciplinary work that exposed participants to the myriad ways in which media and matter are always already affecting creative processes, whether in the arts, humanities, or STEM.

Member Interview

New Materialist Aesthetics and Pedagogy: An Interview with Thomas Nail

By Katherine Robert September 19, 2019

Katherine Robert: You taught an aesthetics course this year and started the first day by saying DU has not taught aesthetics in a long time and it is taught less frequently in US philosophy departments than other areas of philosophy. I was intrigued by that. So, if you could if you could elaborate on that.

Thomas Nail: I was told DU has not taught aesthetics in 14 years. It is probably the least taught philosophy course of the core areas of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics, and moral theory. It also has some of the fewest publications of the core areas. I think there are two reasons for this. The privileged areas of philosophy are metaphysics “what is” and epistemology, “how we know what is.” Western idealism has made those the foundations of philosophy. Aesthetics is often not considered to be a foundational philosophical discourse because it does not answer these two questions in universal terms. There is also a long history of suspicion of sensation and perception in Western philosophy. Philosophers and scientists have almost always thought that the body is out there to trick us. The senses deceive you and knowledge and the intellect are what is true. So that’s one reason.

The second reason is that aesthetics is not useful or instrumental like most moral theory: ethics and politics. People often argue that it is important to teach moral theory because it is directly relevant and useful for people’s lives. It might help them make important political decisions like voting or ethical action. But aesthetics is not instrumentally useful like this so it is quite literally the most “useless” of the philosophical areas.

KR: So, it’s not pragmatic or utilitarian.

TN: Yes, aesthetics doesn’t, in my thinking at least, get at universal truths and it doesn’t give you any instrumental value. It doesn’t give you any categories to judge the world; it doesn’t help you in any clear instrumental way. It changes who you are. So that’s why I think aesthetics is not taught. It doesn’t fit those prevailing dominant categories of what is philosophically important. I personally think, however, that aesthetics is absolutely crucial. Sensation is what life is about... (laughs). Everything has sensuous qualities that cannot be abstracted or reduced to the other areas of philosophy. All the core areas are inseparable. Its a fiction of the West to have divided them up this way in the first place.

KR: So how did [the class] emerge?

TN: So my research is very much focused on inverting the hierarchy that says that the senses and materiality deceive our quest for universal truth. I think sensation is primary for nature and for humans. In my book *Theory of the Image* I wanted to think about aesthetics from a new materialist perspective and from a non-anthropocentric perspective. There was not a single book about new materialism and aesthetics at the time, and that’s why I wanted to write it. I wanted to start with materiality and sensation and show the entanglement of all four core areas. So that was my interest going into the course: to teach aesthetics from a materialist and non-anthropological perspective based on my research.

Interview continued

KR: So... your co-instructor, how did you end up co-teaching it and why him- cause he's a rationalist. How did that come about? And what did you learn? Because it was fascinating to be in the class and watch the tensions and watch two philosophers at work, doing the work of philosophy.

TN: That was for me what was most fun about that. I didn't realize how different we were until teaching the class so part of it was just discovery of figuring out where this other person is coming from and over the course just watching that unfold. It wasn't even obvious immediately what, how, and why his perspective was so different. So I learned a lot about where he was coming from and how far his argument goes and how it works. That was beneficial to me personally. There are a lot of people who are anthropocentric rationalists and who still have an investment in metaphysics and epistemology as the true foundations of philosophy and who don't see aesthetics to be equally fundamental. They have lots of reasons for that. They might even like art and music too—but they do not agree that *everything* is fully sensuous. They believe that there are also "abstract mental objects" like the *idea* of a triangle that are fundamentally *non-sensuous* and *immaterial*. For me this belief is a speculative metaphysical claim neither provable nor falsifiable. So it was interesting to see how we differed and why. Definitely the fun part was having that dialogical experience of walking through the argument in ways that I don't usually start from. So, bridging those two gaps I think was good for the class and also a challenge to try to teach.

KR: So, would you co-teach a class again with someone with a very different mindset, or are there pros and cons to teaching with someone who is really similar and on the same page versus being with someone who is coming from a really different perspective?

TN: Yes, and yes.

KR: Let me ask it this way, where do you want to go? Or is this Making Media Matter class the next step for you?

TN: Yes, materialist pedagogy is what I would like to work on now.

KR: So, this is an emergent process...? Pedagogically for you?

TN: Yes, the Making Media Matter class is the kind of co-teaching which is not just co-teaching, it's collaborative; we're doing something together and it feels very generative. Everybody is putting something into making a new class none of us had ever taught. From the get-go it was structured in a really organic and participatory way where everyone, including the students, were all doing and contributing and designing the course together. It has been rewarding, novel, and it's pushing me in really interesting ways and directions that I had not anticipated—and that are great.

KR: You're describing the differences in your pedagogical practices... the one was a traditional lecture, a theoretical lecture...

TN: For me, the lecture structure has not been as good for teaching new materialism.

KR: You weren't *doing* new materialism, we were studying new materialism.

TN: That's right. We were just reading people who had written about new materialism.

Interview continued

KR: So, it's that "doing" pedagogy again, that active moving pedagogy.

TN: It was cool to do another aesthetics/art and new materialism related class that was so different in material format and just to feel how really different they are. Especially doing materialist pedagogy. I am just at the start of my experiments in materialist pedagogy but this MMM class has really got me thinking in a new way. Everything has to change now.

KR: Which is again the structure of academia and what we all are expected to do and fall in and if you want to break out of that you have to figure out how to do it- no one is going to support you with it (laughs).

TN: Well, that's the thing that's also very special about this three-way highly experimental co-taught class: its only happening because of special provisional funding. The class and all our public events and invited speakers have been amazing but it is all impossible without money.

KR: It's lost revenue.

TN: It's expensive if you want to have this kind of experimental education that is driven by methodology; the college gave us this money in order to experiment with new pedagogical methods and we are grateful. But it rarely happens. I would like to see it happen in the future of course but it's not certain. Most people teaching do not have this opportunity and face all kinds of constraints. Innovation is too expensive...

KR: In the current model...

TN: In the current model it is too expensive to have three faculty teaching thirty students and then to triple cross list the course. There's also a barrier that we could only triple cross list in our college; if we wanted to do anything with the college of education or Korbelt or the law school we actually could not do it because they cannot figure out how the credits will overlap between colleges (laughs). Its such a barrier to genuine interdisciplinary teaching and research.

KR: Wow... isn't that amazing. Well, thank you!

Submissions for Winter 2020 Issue

Please email information to Katherine or Adam for the next issue by January 2, 2020, including calendar events & upcoming classes, recent publications, blog & interview ideas, sound file links, and images. We are also looking for ideas for a group event for winter quarter. This newsletter is a collaboration so please contribute!

Background images are original photographs by Katherine Robert

Editors: Adam Loch, PhD Student DU/Illiff School of Theology Joint Doctoral Program (Adam.Loch@du.edu)
Katherine Robert, PhD Candidate Higher Education (Katherine.robert@du.edu)