This is the published version


Available from Deakin Research Online

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30064236

Copyright: 2013, The Author
If ontology concerns theories of being, and epistemology theories of knowing, how might we bring the two together to account for movements between being and knowing that constitute cultural production? Something occurs or lies behind language and meaning that must be acknowledged if we are to arrive at an explanation. In this paper, I will examine some key ideas that emerge from the work of Julia Kristeva to demonstrate how ontology and epistemology are inextricably entwined in knowledge production. Kristeva’s account of creative practice not only aligns with the new materialist acknowledgement of the agency of matter, but through her explication of experience-in-practice, it also affirms the dimension of human/subjective agency that is implicated in cultural production.

My account here will involve moving between Kristevan thought, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s reflections on the question, “What is philosophy?” and later, to an account of Australian indigenous ontology and art by Brian Martin. In weaving together some of the conceptual threads afforded by these domains of thought, I hope to illuminate the relationship between being and knowing as living process.

In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari put forward a materialist a conception of knowledge production, which they describe as “the art of forming, inventing and fabricating concepts” (Deleuze & Guattari 1994:2). However, whilst they do
acknowledge the implication of the human subject through their notion of conceptual personae, they do not fully elucidate the crucial relationship between biology, matter and language that gives rise to semiosis as an ineluctable foundation of ontoepistemology. Kristevan thought, provides a model for understanding how material-discursive practices emerge from corporeal responses and are translated into language and thought. In experience-in-practice there is a constant movement between the material world, the biological/material self (the self as “other”) and the social self. This movement gives rise to a performative production of knowledge or ontoepistemology.

“Permeability” is a useful term for unravelling Kristeva’s account of the complex relationship between body and mind and individual and society as a dynamic process of how we come to make meaning. It allows us to understand that humans are continuous with nature and other objects in the world. Biological processes that support and enable human life operate as a semiotic “filter” and this filtering attributes value to objects encountered via sensation and affect. Kristeva demonstrates that human consciousness and language are products of these “filtering” processes.

A crucial distinction between Kristeva and Deleuze and Guattari’s accounts can be found in their differing conceptions of “affect” and the emphasis that Kristeva places on the link between affect and language. Affect is hardwired into the human biological system as an instinctual mechanism for warding off - impelling the organism away from - what is sensed as dangerous and harmful and for registering pleasurable sensations. In departing from Freud, Kristeva suggests that both negative and positive affect have the power to impel; they can therefore be understood as a
form of agency. It is in the phase where pleasure or un-pleasure is registered that objects begin to take on value or become perceptions as opposed to what Deleuze and Guattari call “percepts” or sensations that are “independent of a state of those who experience them” Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 164)

Deleuze and Guattari’s conceive affects as non-human becomings or blocs of sensation that occur when material passes into sensation. They explain that this takes place within a zone or phase of indetermination and indiscernibility that precedes immediately before natural differentiation. In this framework affects are non-human compounds of sensation that occur when humans become continuous with the material world. When sensation becomes sensation of a concept, the composite sensation is reterritorialized. (1994:199). Deleuze and Guattari’s explication of these human/non-human transformations is ambiguous and couched in abstractions that do not fully explain the movement from the material process (blocs of undifferentiated sensation as being) to the subject of language and thought. Kristeva’s notion of heterogeneity on the other hand, precludes the conception of pure or undifferentiated sensation of (human) beings. Central to understanding this and how being and language co-emerge is what Kristeva has theorised as the semiotic chora that gives rise to the heterogeneity of language: the “symbolic” - language as it signifies (the communicative function of language) - and the “semiotic” language as it is related to material or biological processes that are closely implicated in affect (Kristeva 1984).

**The Semiotic and The Symbolic**

The semiotic chora, the space or site of biological interactions and exchanges between the infant and the mother’s body, registers the first imprints of experience
that are rudimentary signals of language that is to follow. It is an articulation of bodily drives, energy charges and psychical marks - a non-expressive totality, known through its effects. This constitutes the heterogeneity that distinguishes human biology and psychic life from the outset. It is also related the dynamism of the body constantly in motion and perpetually seeking to maximise the capacities of the living organism. It is a complex of pulsations - intensities tensions and release of tensions that occur through interactions with what lies beyond or outside the living system.

Kriteva tells us that operations of the *chora*, organise pre-verbal psychic space according to logical categories that precede and transcend language. These operations or semiotic functions, which are constituted through biological drives and energy discharges, initially oriented around the mother’s body, persist as an asymbolic modality that governs the connections between the body and the “other” throughout the life of the subject. They articulate a continuum between the body and external objects and between the body and *language* (Kristeva 1984: 27). We may now understand the “semiotic” as an alternative material “code” of language, a “bodily knowing” that nonetheless implicates itself in relays of meaning that are manifested in social relations.

In creative production, the drives or impulses that are articulated by the semiotic operate through and in language and result in variations and multiplicity of meanings that may be produced. The semiotic disposition of language, which corresponds to what Deleuze and Guattari describe as harmonies rhythms or style, establishes a relational functioning between the signifying code and the fragmented or drive ridden body of the speaking (and hearing/seeing) subject (Kristeva 1986: 29). This putting-
into-process of language must connect with our biological processes, affects and feelings in a vital way in order for language to take on particular meanings or to affect us. Creative practice or “the productive performance” of language maintains the link between the semiotic and the symbolic, between discourse and our lived and situated experiences - our material being in the world. Three terms, “negativity”, “rejection” and “significance” are crucial to understanding Kristeva’s account of language as material process.

**Negativity and Rejection**

“Negativity” can be understood as the processes of semiotic motility and charges or “death drive”, a force that impels movement towards an undifferentiated or archaic phase that precedes the subject’s entry into language. Kristeva draws on Freud to explain negativity as a drive or urge, inherent in organic life to return earlier states. (Kristeva: 1984:160). Negativity operates dynamically and dialectically between the biological and social order, replacing the fixed categories and oppositions of language to produce what Kristeva refers to as an “infinitesimal differentiation within the phenotext” (Kristeva 1984: 126).

Negativity is closely related to, and cannot be considered apart from two related concepts in Kristeva’s account of language as material process. She posits “expenditure “ or “rejection” as better terms for explaining the movement of material contradictions that generate the semiotic function. If negativity is a motility or dynamism that seeks an undifferentiated state, rejection is what repeatedly interrupts this movement. Rejection moves between the two poles of drives and consciousness. Think of negativity and rejection working together as a kind of pre-linguistic pulse
that sets up a constant rhythmic responsiveness to language and to other objects in the world. Rejection constitutes the shattering of unity or unified meaning. It has a relation or connection to language, but only in terms of what Kristeva’s refers to as scission or separation that opens up a crucible of intensities and sensation where meaning is ruptured, superseded and exceeded (Kristeva 1984: 147). This is an indication of the asymbolic functioning of the chora as discussed above. However, rejection is ambiguous in that it is also a pre-condition for the emergence of new meanings and renewed or recuperated subjectivity. The perpetual rhythms and workings of material and biological processes that maintain the living organism: negativity–rejection… negativity–rejection… are continuous with processes that produce the subject, language and meaning. They begin the process of “filtering” that transforms stimuli into coherent form. What is important to note at this stage, is that in aesthetic experience, both the production and reception of the artwork, inscribes negativity and rejection by bringing the symbolic function into an encounter with the semiotic or material dimensions of the work. This results in an unsettling and multiplying of meaning (Kristeva, 1984:22) and the work is experienced both as material object and as a form of representation as be illustrated with reference to the work of Brian Martin. The ongoing renewal and production of the subject or subjectivity through material processes underpins the ongoing renewal and production of language and meaning, in creative practice as onto-epistemology.

**Signifiance**

Kristeva uses the term *signifiance* to distinguish the supplementary signifying process from signification - the conventional way in which words signify meaning. *Signifiance* is an alternative signifying process that is the result of the heterogeneous
workings of language which articulates both symbolic and semiotic dispositions: language as it is conventionally coded as opposed to material/sensory articulations of language - sound, rhythm and prosody in verbal language; colour, line and other formal elements in visual language. This double articulation of language allows the text or artwork that emerges from experience-in-practice to signify what the communicative or representative function of the work cannot say. (Kristeva, 1980: 18). *Signifiance* allows us to grasp how words or verbal and visual utterances can be charged with multiple and hitherto unimagined meanings. If we look at Edvard Munch’s (1893) painting *The Scream* for example, this relationship becomes apparent. (slide 2). The unity of the composition is constantly disrupted by the impact of lines creating dynamism and movement and breaking up the compositional space. Ambiguity and indeterminacy give rise to multiple meanings – for example it is difficult to distinguish landscape from sky or to tell if the two figures in the background are approaching or receding. If we keep looking long enough, the retinal impact of colour and line operate synesthetically to becomes noise, and the surface of the painting induces not meaning, but sensation.

From a brief encounter with Munch’s painting, we can see how the semiotic, as well as being a precondition for the symbolic, functions synchronically with the symbolic. The marks, swirling lines and brushstrokes in Munch’s painting, both indicate and exceed their representational and compositional functions. Sensation, language and thought become concurrent and interchangeable and the boundaries between them are permeable. The work captures the artist’s particular lived and embodied experience and preserves it in what Deleuze and Guattari describe as a “bloc of sensation” of
lived experience – the work is not a only representation of the scream it *is* the scream as sensation; these two elements affect the viewer *simultaneously.*

In Deleuze and Guattari’s schema such a work would give rise to percepts and affects that engender a non-human becoming, where being and the world merge as material process. How can we explain this erasure of the subject and emanation of the work of art without falling into mysticism? Kristeva suggests that psychoanalysis provides us with a way out of the impasse through its account of the relationship between biological processes and thought/language. In a sense, psychoanalysis gestures towards notions of a “transcendental” that neither privileges the Cartesian subject nor social constructivist accounts of the subject. Kristevan thought, with its insistence on heterogeneity does not fully jettison the human or subjective dimension of this process because in a Kristevan framework, the subject as sensation, as *being* is also an already constituted (heterogeneous) subject of the symbolic.

It has perhaps become clear from the discussion, so far, that words and images strike the body in the same way as objects. Deleuze and Guattari acknowledge that philosophical concepts are also sensibilia in the same way that aesthetic objects are sensibilia (Deleuze and Guattari1994: 5). Aesthetic experience also corresponds with what they describe as the moment that material passes into sensation and articulates a zone in which we no longer know which is animal and which is human (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 173). What Kristeva provides however, is an understanding of the originary processes that link bodily processes to language. This is fundamental to grasping the idea of creative production as material process, and as an alternative mode of *semiosis.*
In *Art beyond Representation* (2004), Barbara Bolt provides illustration of this in her description of experience-in-practice as “working hot”. In material practices such as painting, there is an intensification of contradiction brought about by the unpredictable and/or accidental effects produced by the interactions of the materials and tools used in the making of the work. Often, this requires speedy and spontaneous responses in which no time or space is left for rational thought. This does not mean as Deleuze and Guattari imply and as Judith Butler has claimed in her notion of performativity (1993), that the subject is strictly speaking, absent. The issue of the subject’s absence in performativity turns on the relationship between the notion of an already constituted subject of language/discourse and the subject of practice – the subject as *being*.

In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva tells us that “The subject never is, the subject is only the *signifying process* and he appears only as a signifying practice” (Kristeva, 1984, 215). It is important not to mistake the inflection in Kristeva’s statement since it does not imply the total absence of the subject, but a movement towards, and appearance of the subject to a more fluid and dynamic process. Elsewhere, Kristeva’s references to the absence of the (human) subject relate to psychoanalytical accounts (particularly that of Lacan) - of the subject as it is positioned or coalesced through the symbolic and the social. In her account of creative practice however, Kristeva’s notion of the “speaking subject” goes beyond such accounts by positing heterogeneity. This casts a different light on Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “sensation as being” and on their description of affects as “non-
human becomings” of man (1994: 169). The notion of heterogeneity acknowledges another register or prevailing presence of “subjectivity” as material process and contradiction that constitute different forms of agency. Kristeva tells us that the experience of practice puts the subject in “process/on trial”, a condition in which subjective processes are predominantly determined by biological processes and drives so that an alternative logic is at work, the logic of material process and of the unconscious where there is “no time” in the sense of linear temporality, and where the binaries and contradictions of the symbolic and established discourses do not hold. The knowledge or reality brought about by direct experience is thus “a signifying apprehension of a new heterogeneous object” (Kristeva 1984:202). This articulates the subject as a filter or passageway where there is a struggle between conflicting tendencies or drives whose stases or representamen are rooted in affective processes. This point is crucial to understanding why and how Kristeva places the subject and forms of subjective agency, rather than mechanistic or automatic processes at the core of revolutionary practice. The key is her conception of “affect” - both positive and negative affects that originate in pleasure and displeasure.

Pleasure can be understood as the removal or absence of displeasure. In encounters with objects in the world, negativity and rejection give rise to sensation; However, following raw sensation is a concurrent emergence or registering of positive or negative affects that attribute value(s) or that “colour” encounters with the material world and other sensibilia. This constitutes a movement towards thought and symbolic language. The question of just how this shift occurs still remains.
The Psychoanalytical term “cathexis” is pertinent here. Synonymous with “investment” cathexis is a drive that implicates subjective motivation or volition towards both libidinal and discursive economies. Charles Rycroft describes it as “a quantity of energy attaching to any object or mental structure” (Rycroft 1995:19). Hypercathexis involves an intensity of investment in one process or set of configurations in order to repress others (Kristeva 1984:14). Kristeva explains that cathexis is a moment of the coalescing of subjectivity according to the pleasures and displeasures of our encounters with objects – something between an emotional commitment and a vested interest in the relative rewards and satisfactions offered in processes of making and interpreting art and indeed in experiences of everyday life. The notion of cathexis permits an understanding of movements between being and knowing or the culminating point that Deleue and Guattari call reterritorialization.

Kristeva’s work posits a materialist “transcendental”: material process as an infinite unfolding or two-way movement between the material world, biological processes and discourse. The subject as biological organism or being, is a “filter” through which objects pass as raw sensation and are then transubstantiated, if you like, into language. In experience-in-practice language becomes the space of an alternative or translinguistic representation that allows a transfer from instinctual conflict arising from the physiological on one hand, and conscious thought on the other. Situated between the body (energy, drive, excitability) and mind (representation), “language allows thought to reach and stabilize energy” (Kristeva 2000: 35).

Finally, Kristeva’s focus on subjective processes as forms of agency must also be understood in relation to the “agency” of materiality itself. Kristeva’s work
acknowledges the agency of “brute” materiality. In her account there is no opposition between inside and outside - consciousness and materiality are mutually constitutive and enfolded. This is the basis of onto-epistemological practice and it is in this sense, that we can begin to articulate what we mean the notion of a “new materialism.”

**Indigenous Ontology**

The notion of “onto-epistemology” as the basis of all cultural production is articulated in Australian artist, Brian Martin’s practice and his account of Australian Indigenous ontology. Martin tells us that in an Indigenous world view, it is self evident that the immaterial and the imaginary, the real and representation occur interchangeably and concurrently. Through his art practice and elaboration of what he calls “real immateriality” Martin brings a fresh perspective to understanding of movements that occur between the material world, being and knowing.

The relationship of culture and “Land” or “Country” is the foundation Indigenous ideology and culture. In a traditional Aboriginal society, movement with and in Country defines material existence as ways of being, ways of doing and ways of knowing. This relationship constitutes and is constituted by the interconnection of memory, life and culture, which are embedded in Country:

Indigenous art practices manifest this trinity. Within this framework, the immaterial is materially constituted by the real material conditions of existence, where the immaterial itself, becomes a reality. This “immateriality” in Indigenous cultural ideology is manifest in the real existence of Country and ever continuing cultural practices. (Martin 2013: 17)
The interrelatedness of material existence and cultural production challenges dominant western discourse and conceptions of art formulated in a representationalist view of the world. The ontological relationship that people have to country is vital in Indigenous cultural practices where the relationship between the referent and the sign is causal and reciprocal. Indigenous ontology and cultural practices are based on a methexical relationship, or what Paul Carter describes as a performative action that brings something into being and existence. (Carter 1996: 84). For example when the emu dance is performed, the being of sensation of the dancer is emu and the aesthetic image produced transfers the sensation of the dancer’s lived experience to the audience. Pertinent here is Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the artwork as “monument”. The artwork as monument does not commemorate the past, but is a bloc of present sensations Deleuze and Guattari (1994:167). In this example it engenders a becoming emu of both the dancer and the audience. Martin observes that this methexical relationship, which entails a collapse between the ontological and the representational, emphasizes the physical/material ground of Indigenous practices and permits an understanding of how, the “real” and the “immaterial”, the “imaginary”, the “spiritual” and the “representational” operate concurrently as “real immateriality”. It is this inter-relatedness and its effects that assign value and meaning in Indigenous cultural production and worldview.

In Indigenous culture there is also no distinction between art, culture and living or being. In Aboriginal language words describing art not nouns, but denote action. The artwork enacts the thing so that a painted landscape, a tree of an animal is the thing itself. Making and viewing artworks involves a re-experiencing of the thing.
As explained in his analysis of the works of Kathleen and Margaret Petyarre,( slide 3) and Badger Bates in his essay entitled “Immaterial land” in *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a ‘New Materialism through the Arts’* (Barrett and Bolt 2013), the function of the repetition of mark-making in Aboriginal art is to engender a performative methexical mapping of Country, to bring Country into being. (see slides 4 and 5 Badger Bates) We see this again in Rover Thomas’ *Landscapes*, (1984) where the dots become an indexical trace of the jabbing action of painting that maps the ground and produces a synesthetic rhythm conveying a sense of movement. This allows the maker to re-experience Country and viewer to grasp how both meaning and re-experiencing emerges from the action of art making (slide 6 Rover Thomas).

In Martin’s drawing practice the interrelationship between figuration and abstraction not only enacts this methexical dimension of art making, but also mirrors the interrelationship between the material and the immaterial, the imaginary and the real. This is achieved through the articulation of the relationship between the abstract and the representational. (Slide 7 Darug 1) In his *Methexical Countryscapes* the rhythm of mark making using charcoal on paper, maps the texture of Country as the artist has experienced it. The scale of the works (2 metres x 1.5 metres) heighten their immersive quality.

However it is his use of the grid (each work is made up of thirty panels) that articulates the relationship between abstraction and figuration and hence the notion of the concurrence of representation and the real or material in aesthetic experience: Martin explains how the grid reveals the double articulation that is a feature of all artworks and of the viewing experience:

> It is at the point where the physical and conceptual meet that the viewer can see how they are made. It is this aspect of drawing “diffractively” that is performative. Drawing “diffractively” is where the image is never fully seen as “realism” because it is diffracted by the grid, and therefore moves in and out of the position of a representationalist way of looking at the world…”

14
Practice enforces us to look from a different positioning, one that moves from the abstract to the concrete concurrently.
(Martin 2013: 84) show slides 8-13)

Martin’s work and his use of the grid to reveal the actions and process of art-making and well the material qualities of visual language, illuminates the fundamentally materialist ontology of Indigenous culture. His work refuses a representationalist mode of thought that has dominated Western discourse since the Enlightenment and was reflected in the development of one-point perspective in European art. This representational thinking, in which the real the imaginary the material and the immaterial are separated, is challenged by the materialist perspectives I have attempted to present in this essay.

_________

Renaissance Architect Filippo Brunelleshi and artist Albrecht Durer employed the grid to establish one-point perspective in order to transfer reality as humans saw it onto to the canvas. Their use of the grid evoked an illusion of three-dimensional reality by transferring visual elements or contours of objects from one scale to another and into two-dimensional form. The drawing then stood in for reality – it was representational. Whilst, the viewer couldn’t walk into the deep space of the painting, he or she would have an imaginary illusion of depth.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Brian Martin for allowing me to present some of his images and to draw on ideas from his unpublished writing in this paper.
References


