

## JULIA BRYAN-WILSON

Because my opinions about new materialism are conflicted, and constantly changing, I find myself unable to produce a singular, unified statement in response to this questionnaire. So, rather than paper over my unresolved thoughts with a false sense of confidence by making an argument along the lines of a simple *for* or *against*, I have decided to keep alive my disjunctive perspectives by writing down, briefly, some recurring—if fragmented—thoughts and questions. I often take recourse to the form of the list when I am faced with a complex decision, or when I am trying to contain my anxiety by atomizing it into more manageable bits. Here the list functions to make visible the coexistence of my trepidations about new materialism and what I understand to be its promises:

- The prompt for this issue mentions several schools of thought in which the question of matter has become central; these schools should not be collapsed into each other as they are often significantly at odds.
- I have always considered art and social movements in relation to process, production, and “old materialist” Marxist questions about the (uneven) inscription of labor. As a result I am more sympathetic to a capacious understanding of “vibrant matter” (loosely inspired by the likes of Jane Bennett) as an intentionally naive way to creatively envision a more ethical relationship to the world around us than I am to post-Kantian object-oriented ontologies, which I have little interest in.
- The upsurge in interest in new materialism has provided a different vocabulary for thinking about *matter*, broadly articulated as more amorphous than discrete objects (or as constitutive of everything, foundational to the human and the non-human), and it has led to enlivening conversations with a wider set of academic interlocutors. If we take seriously the idea that we are comprised of the stuff around us (and the substances inside us), might this open up important conversations about justice, accountability, and care? These urgent issues are being considered across the humanities, and new materialism has provided one useful platform for those dialogues.
- New materialism, in part, holds out the promise that our objects might adequately articulate their origins, counteracting capitalism’s pervasive veilings and mystifications.
- But art history, too, has long considered objects to be animated bearers of history. We teach our students that, in some perhaps not totally metaphorical sense, the things of material culture can, with proper attention, come alive. Some of the moves made by new materialism thus feel familiar, but these affiliations with or even indebtedness to art history—as a discipline trained to think carefully about matter—have been largely disavowed or elided.
- An even greater occlusion: many non-Western and Native epistemological frameworks propose a fluid subject/object divide, yet such worldviews have been scarcely considered in the mainstream object-oriented ontology literature (which is dom-

inated by white men).

- Hannah Arendt writes, “Dear matter, natural and artificial, changing and unchanging, depends in its being, that is, in its appearingness, on the presence of living creatures. Nothing and nobody exists in a world whose very being does not presuppose a *spectator*.” Arendt grasps the radical reciprocity of being and appearing, and considers the categories of subject and object to be ever-mobile. She continues, “The worldliness of living things means that there is no subject that is not also an object and appears as such to somebody else.”<sup>1</sup>

- I am concerned that art institutions have latched on to a renewed investment in the object because it provides perfect justification for the impulse to collect, reify, and institutionalize every scrap, every residue, every trace. This is especially troubling when it comes to accessioning the remains of fleeting performances, as props, costumes, and the like are turned into quasi-relics.

- Why the rise of matter and the entrenchment of objects now, in the early 2000s? What are the political stakes for this focus on materiality in our present moment? Is the growing theoretical attention to stuff an outgrowth of our widespread hoarding culture? Is it an attempt to return to the tangible in an age marked by digital remove and drone warfare? Or is it just commodity fetishism with a fresh justification, old wine in trendy new bottles, all shined up for hyper-acquisitive times?

- The emergence of thing theory coincides with court cases in which some nonhuman animals, like laboratory chimpanzees (previously considered property), are being re-categorized as “legal persons” with rights. Will the legal status of “thing” versus human become increasingly blurred, and what are the policy implications of reshuffling priorities away from the primacy of the human?

- Some of the theoretical enchantments with objects feel reactionary, blithely unconcerned with issues of power and privilege on multiple axes. As an antidote to those, I am indebted to my daily conversations with Mel Y. Chen, whose work offers a profound understanding of how hierarchies of race, ability, gender, and sexuality constitute and undo the contingent categories of thingness.<sup>2</sup> Chen thinks deeply about what it means to be marked as human, and less than human, as we are shaped by structures of racism and ableism. Critical race, queer, and crip theory is a vital counterpoint to the overwhelming whiteness of so much academic discourse on new materialism.

- A year ago I wrote an essay on a recent series of beaded canvases by a white woman artist who had moved from the US to South Africa. They are meticulous pieces, the culmination of many hours of beading by the black South African women that the artist gainfully employed as studio assistants. But the art’s beauty and the painstaking efforts that generated it were incommensurate, and I found it difficult to reconcile my uneasiness about the racial politics of this practice with the canvas’s glowing surfaces. I focused on the beads themselves, hoping their materiality would lead to the crucial, volatile interplay of work and value

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 19.

2. Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012).

and race. But in the end, the beads told me very little. Sometimes objects remain recalcitrant, silent, stubbornly obscure. This experience left me with questions that aren't fully answered by new materialist assertions about the primacy of end products, rather than the racialized economic processes that subtend their creation and distribution.

- While objects are being elevated, certain people are still treated as expendable things. Or even despised, as what Stuart Hall calls, after Mary Douglas, “matter out of place.”<sup>3</sup> Black men and black women and black trans folks continue to be killed by police and others in a moment saturated by racist state violence. The material fact of these many deaths reveals the stakes of who gets to adjudicate life and non-life.
- Given the brutality that accumulates with every passing day in the US and elsewhere, I am increasingly weary of arguments that matter matters. Rather, I will reiterate, as so many continue to do in the face of raging indifference and systemic cruelty, that
- **BLACK LIVES MATTER.**
- The founders of #BlackLivesMatter, Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza, cogently theorize about the duplicity of matter when they write: “Black queer and trans folks bear a unique burden from a hetero-patriarchal society that disposes of us like garbage and simultaneously fetishizes us and profits off of us.”<sup>4</sup>
- In 2015, as an extension of his series with African American quilting traditions and the possible use of quilts as a communication tool along the Underground Railroad, Sanford Biggers produced a work assembled out of antique quilts, tar, glitter, oil stick, spray paint, and fringe. Breaking free of the rectangular frame, the piece zigzags ten feet along the wall. Legible from among its many patterns is the word MATTER. Using the tactility of textiles to comment on black histories of making and legacies of objectification under slavery, Biggers' piece reads like a retort to white new materialisms that ignore racial difference, instead asserting the unevenness, vulnerability, and specificity of black mattering.

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON is Associate Professor of Contemporary Art at UC Berkeley.

3. Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other,’” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Hall (London: Open University, 1997), p. 236.

4. Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza, “This Is not a Moment, but a Movement,” <http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>.