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## FEELING/FOLLOWING: CREATIVE EXPERIMENTS AND MATERIAL PLAY

The Anthropocene addresses us: it compels us to re-think how we—as researchers from fields of anthropology, geography, philosophy, and the arts—carry out investigations in the world. In this essay, we propose forms of creative experiments and play as a way to follow the life of materials. Such an endeavor is part of a particular ontological commitment to new ways of knowing in the Anthropocene. This contribution is a statement of purpose for radically interdisciplinary modes of research that emerged from a series of animated conversations about creative experimentation at the Anthropocene Campus.

Modern disciplines are organized around orientations to particular spheres and zones of life. However, based on the ecologies of practices they enlist, disciplines can also be thought of as particular ways of being affected. If, following Brian Massumi, we accept that affect is as much about a capacity to be affected as it is a capacity to affect and act in return, this poses larger, global questions when considering affect as a proposition for an anthropogenic re-assembling of disciplinary boundaries. What would a reframing of discipline offer our performance of research in a planetary context, in which being affected is an urgent political and ethical condition?

The question: “What is the Anthropocene?” is still an unanswerable one. Despite the array of proposals for various “markers” for this geologic epoch—from traces of Strontium 90 to the topographical stamps of

plantations—there is doubt about our capacity to adequately define this era, and its relation to planetary history. However, the Anthropocene certainly affects our practices as scholars, thinkers, and sentient beings. It forces us to reconsider our notions of time, nature, work, and the human. The demands of the Anthropocene do not operate only at the level of research presentation, but clash in the liminal realm of methods, devices, and concepts. In many ways, the Anthropocene does more than just resist our categorizations: it addresses what we mean by knowing, and enrolls us as cognizant beings in a world of multiple ontologies that exceed the human. We suggest that this blur should be taken as an opportunity: if we cannot “address the Anthropocene”—in the way that modern disciplines hoped to address objects situated in the world—we must at least explore its contours. We begin, here, by paying attention to the ways in which the Anthropocene affects us. We prioritize the ways it moves us and demands our attention; we remain open to the questions it poses to our established convictions. Here, our ambition is not to define the Anthropocene, nor to affix its boundaries as an object of research. Rather, we propose a reinvigoration of experimental, creative practices as privileged processes of knowing, and a “following” of materials that multiplies the repertoires in which we can speak about life in the Anthropocene.

Crucially, our attention to creative experiments is an endeavor to revive experimentation as an open source ecological practice, and to equate it with experience once again. The separation of experience from experiment was a project of the Enlightenment, one that sought to strip the mythology of the personal (subjective) from the rational order and canon of scientific knowledge. Here, in parallel with an emergent hegemony of rational thought, an epistemological weight was ascribed to experiment stripped of its subjective character—and thus denied its ability to respond to those experiential elements not yet quantifiable or describable by the language of logic.<sup>1</sup> Within this movement, the “experiment” came to stand for first-order, observable, or reproducible qualia, with experience relegated to the position of secondary, internal, or subjective qualia. The experiment has come to be equated with a kind of

secluded ritual space, with specific properties that circumscribe the scope of “valid” knowledge, and root it in multiple forms of violence. This violence is notably one of the methods—an obligated, unitary access to the world, brandished against all others which are doomed for elimination.<sup>2</sup> It is also the violence of the current process of writing, in response to research calls and proposals, with its attendant need for ethical protocols, risk assessment, pre-framing of methods, well-defined objects, boundaries of fieldwork, and expected results. However, similar difficulties can also be encountered in a phenomenological approach that adopts experience as the category of establishing knowledge; this approach ignores the subtleties of difference and fails to nuance the complex ways in which people experience their environments.<sup>3</sup> Subjective experience—while always historically and culturally situated—informs knowledge production. As such, it intersects with the realm of objective knowledge. Subjective qualia cannot be cleanly segregated from the seemingly “objective” first-order qualia.

The creative experiments compelled by the Anthropocene are not those that would codify processes and events such that they can be replicated in particular assemblages, ready to be reconstructed; as such practices risk denying us the possibility of being affected by the experiment. What we mean by experiment has a different tenor: experimentation as that which places knowledge at risk, questions what we know and how we know it, and seeks to reinstate knowledge as grounded in subjective, self-reflexive, and transforming practices. Creative experiments are careful, exploratory engagements through which we follow, act, react, record, and trace the often-messy material convergences of concept, matter, and energy in the universe.

Knowledge is in and of the world. To recognize this is to expose our knowledge to change or challenge. It is to be open to the unexpected, to accidents and coincidences, to “embrace failure,”<sup>4</sup> and to welcome serendipity. In creative experiments, knowledge is not the result, but that which is generated along the experimental process. In the *History of Modern Fact*, Mary Poovey demonstrates that paying attention to the

process of fact-creation allows one to critically reflect on knowledge itself.<sup>5</sup> Knowledge is not viewed here as a discrete category, but as one that constantly intersects with its specific epistemological frames and thought traditions. Creative experiments must embrace this trait by accounting for the unfolding processes inherent to objects of research. We propose inquiries that make, assemble, grow, and curate in ways that cannot be assessed in pre-established outputs: the processes of these experiments' unruly deployment "change[s] the end in changing the means."<sup>6</sup>

By beginning with the Anthropocene, and how it affects us and demands a reformulation for understanding and studying it, we find ourselves proposing "creative experiments": a material play-cum-experimentation that attends to and follows the movements and ontologies that emerge at the level of experience. This is our opportunity to reconcile experience with experiment, to re-insert "value" into the experiential as a way of understanding and thinking about materials. Importantly, the experimental trajectory of material play is never predetermined by the "already-givens" of material science. This is not to suggest that material play blinds itself to empirical data or the mechanics of scientific experimentation; rather, these scientific givens offer up a set of conditions through which such play might emerge. Here, the endless treatise, methodologies, and theoretical data with which scientific experimentation has gifted us exist as invitations; as nominative thresholds to be tested, probed, and manipulated through a playful interaction with materials, which seek to link that empirical data with an experiential knowledge—embodied, intuited, unfolding. What is offered is the experimental possibility of bringing together first- and second-order qualia at the level of enquiry, and a re-formulation of objects and method, such that each communicates the same thing, through the condition of raw experience.

## Feeling/Following

Given the difficulties that the Anthropocene poses, we propose the creative experiment as a process of discovery. At its heart lies a radical openness that makes it possible for the researcher to engage with his or her chosen object of study without being bound-up in and limited by pre-established grids of knowledge. In this section, we draw from Henri Bergson to help articulate the nuanced ways in which we, as researchers, hope to creatively experiment with the Anthropocene.

*In Matter and Memory* (2004), Bergson argues that a purely rational reading of material and space limits us only to the realm of what is already known. Our normative reading of material and space is subtractive: from the wealth of information, movement, and change given in and of our milieu and relations, we tend to extract only those elements of which we estimate that we can make some functional use.<sup>7</sup> To overcome these dominant narratives—that is, to shift beyond the limits of a purely logical and linear reading of materials and milieu—requires a twist in our perceptual frames and devices, such that we are able to attend to something other.

For Bergson, the primary method of attuning and attending to this otherness was his concept of intuition, which he attempted to elevate to the level of scientific method by gifting intuition its own precise methodology.<sup>8</sup>

Here, intuition as a method broadly asks for a process of thinking and attending which is located in the flow and rhythm of duration—that is, in the subjective experience of the passage of time. It is here, by attending to the internal rhythm of one's own duration, that Bergson claims we are able to move outward, and seek a sympathetic resonance with the rhythm of the objects, materials, and elements surrounding us. This sympathetic durational resonance is at the heart of an intuitive understanding of matter and material. It is here, also, that we might locate a different basis for perceptual selection and reification in creative experiments and material play, guided by intuitive resonance rather than by utility or habit. Importantly, an intuitive understanding of material is underwritten by the

condition of primary, sensory experience: experience as it happens, experience prior to logical codification, experience as it emerges in the passage of time. Creative experiments and material play thus require a different kind of attention, one that moves beyond the filters normatively imposed on one's perceptual framework by the hegemonic tropes of linearity, utility, and habit. This kind of creative play both enables and requires a shift in perceptual hierarchies, such that we can attend equally to the minor and the peripheral, the occluded and the "useless," the mutating and the fleeting. In breaking with these filters—in attending to an excluded otherness—we are able to open onto possibilities for experimentation that are guided by intuition, sensation, and experience. We are able to draw from the realm of the "unknown."

Creative experiments, for us, are fundamentally about feeling and *following* materials. Embedded in this logic is our conviction that the Anthropocene obliges us to think of knowledge without the schema of traditional disciplinary frameworks: it invites us to invent different *ad hoc* disciplinary paths and diagrams, to multiply them, to follow new or ancient grains in the textures of thought. This, to us, is less a methodology than a procedure of discovery.

We take inspiration from what makers and artisans have always done: splitting timber, for instance, "is a question of surrendering to the wood and following where it leads."<sup>9</sup> As Tim Ingold argues, to describe the properties of things in a processual world is to describe their stories as they flow and metamorphose.<sup>10</sup>

Breaking with "methods" whose aim is to purify phenomena by isolating them from "background noise," following is to embark on a quest through the Anthropocene in its open-ended multiplicity. To follow the opacity and obduracy of the Anthropocene, we must let it initiate its own terms of enquiry. Following anthropocenic materials will lead us into terrains where we find contradictions. Rather than trying to resolve these, creative experimentation and material play identifies the shifting contours within which the Anthropocene is made explicit.



“Following,” as an orientation for research, is also resonant with the ethos of Isabelle Stengers’ metaphor of the “solitary hunter.” According to Stengers, the solitary hunter “takes his time”; the art of the solitary hunt is “*empathy*.”<sup>11</sup> The German word for “empathy”—*Einfühlung*— translates directly as “feeling into.” Without taking too many liberties with Stengers, we read “the art of [feeling into]” as a negotiation between the pull of the one followed, and the acuity of the one following. The task of the hunter/huntress is to suspend his or her own logic in order to be radically open to the logic of the “prey.” This meaning of feeling/ following articulates our methodological affinity for research that is as much about apprehending the trajectory of specific concepts (e.g. kinds of pain, or affective atmospheres) as it is about tracing the many impressions of these concepts in a “milieu,” or “field.” An empathic practice of “feeling into” requires a shift in the understanding of our roles as researchers, and of what is possible within these roles. To find ourselves thoroughly immersed in spaces of dense relations to carry out research—spaces that are at once concrete and enigmatic—is to trace sequences of material impressions through radically interdisciplinary landscapes.

As in Stengers’ metaphor of the hunt, following is not a *static* logic but an *athletic* one. It is not a passive engagement, but an ontological commitment to allow oneself to be affected by threads that reach far beyond one’s “home” discipline. This notion of collaboration with materials, therefore, works to reconstitute disciplinary zones, even to abolish entirely the gaps between them, instead tracing various filaments across fields of study.

<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976, pp. 115–17. →

<sup>2</sup> Isabelle Stengers, “Wondering about materialism,” in: Levy Bryant et al. (eds), *The Speculative Turn: Continental materialism and realism*. Melbourne: re.press, 2011, pp. 368–80. →

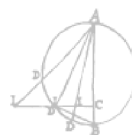


- 3 Robert Desjarlais, *Shelter Blues*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997. →
- 4 Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the ecology of experience*. Minneapolis, MN, and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. →
- 5 Mary Poovey, *History of Modern Fact: Problems of knowledge in the sciences of wealth and society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998. →
- 6 Bruno Latour, "Morality and technology: The end of the means," *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 19, nos 5/6 (2002): pp. 247–60, p. 252. →
- 7 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, tr. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer. New York: Dover Publications, 2004, p. 30. →
- 8 Bergson, Henri, *The Creative Mind: An introduction to metaphysics*, tr. M. L. Andison. New York, NY: Dover Books, 2007, p. 20; Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*. New York, NY: Zone Books, 1991, p. 13. →
- 9 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. New York, NY: Zone Books, 2004, p. 451. →
- 10 Tim Ingold, "Materials against materiality," *Archaeological Dialogues*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2007): pp. 1–16. →
- 11 Isabelle Stengers, *Power and Invention: Situating Science*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. →

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