

2014 Vol 14 Issue No. 2 — New Immaterialities

> EDITORIAL

This special issue of *Transformations* examines the various ways in which immateriality is encountered, invoked, conceptualised and investigated in cultural theory and creative practice. “Immateriality,” as a concept and a term, regularly surfaces in a time of well-entrenched materialism. New media arts and the virtual have all been understood, without irony, to be involved in the ephemeral and the immaterial. Forms and forces often imagined as incorporeal, such as spectres and hauntings, provide metaphors for historical and cultural processes. Reflecting on immateriality can be described as a different angle of approach to and re-imagining of matter. In this context the bodied and the disembodied are not opposed but reciprocally permeable. This relationship raises questions about the new places and practices through which immateriality emerges. Immateriality comes to serve new explanatory purposes as it shadows and is reconfigured within changing materialisms.

The topics discussed in this issue – psychological experimentation, historical archives, computer systems, heritage villages, art installations, media technology, transference and telepathy – all exhibit the intimacy of the corporeal and the incorporeal, the inevitable emergence of each among, via, with, and despite the other. Also apparent is the entanglement of intangibility with irrelevance – all-too-often that which cannot be easily perceived is deemed to be unimportant. The practices by which the incorporeal erupts within, transmutes into, disrupts, inflects, haunts and disguises the corporeal involve processes of establishing and disassembling significance, both as consequence and meaning.

To introduce the issue, Lisa Blackman positions the term immateriality in the context of her work on the history of psychological experimentation and the possibilities for a “future-psychology.” She points out that the immaterial, in the sense of the unseen and the ghostly, should not be understood and dismissed as irrelevant as it so often is by the contemporary materialism of the science and humanities. Her (re)turn to immateriality extends to recognising a role for subjectivity, which is often considered marginal to contemporary experimental proceedings in psychology while historically playing a central role in such experimentation. The side-lining of the performative aspect of experimentation to instead focus on the body through restrictive notions of the physiological leads to the neglect of important but more intangible psychological processes, which in turn overly delimits the theorising of mind–matter relationships. Blackman reemphasises the

importance of subjectivity by considering the transformation of the experience of hearing voices through their mediation via listeners and social media. This practice allows for voices experienced as extra-personal and non-cognitive to be reconceived as trans-subjective phenomena, and is an example of how exploring threshold conditions displaces “distinctions between the intentional and non-intentional, the material and immaterial and self and other.”

The next two papers examine how historical representations are haunted and disrupted by immateriality. Esther Peeren employs the concept of spectrality to examine the dynamics of materiality and immateriality in a contested history. Sven Augustijnen’s artistic multimedia exhibition *Spectres* (2011) includes a feature film and documents relating to an ex-colonial officer’s investigation into the execution of Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected leader of the Congo. Peeren argues that the artwork invokes a “persistently ambivalent materiality (its presence as absence or absence as presence).” The failed efforts to locate Patrice Lumumba’s body engender a haunting spectral immateriality. Attempts to determine what is relevant or irrelevant to an account of events flounder as details are sought, uncovered, accumulated and destabilised. The multi-directionality of collective memory apparent in the artwork thwarts the usual monumentalising tendencies of documentaries in their settling of a legacy. The spectre exceeds knowledge – there is too much unknown about events for the archive to fully control “what matters.”

Aleksandra Kaminska and Janine Marchessault examine the art exhibition *Land/Slide Possible Futures* (2013) held on the site of the Markham Museum heritage village. They articulate how immaterial memories and histories omitted from the construction of heritage villages can be summoned. As idealised representations of the past, heritage villages present a unified account of history, usually from the perspective of nineteenth-century settlers. Messy, complicated, multiple and problematic aspects of history are omitted, reflecting the values and prejudices of the times the heritage villages were built. The art installations of *Land/Slide Possible Futures* respond to such selective historicisation by re-introducing the histories of First Nations peoples, women and children, criminals, as well as the ambiguities of events. The multiplicity and plurality of immaterial memory, in distinction to history, is manifest in a re-imagining of the heritage site as an uncanny *lieux de mémoire* that renders the past unfamiliar, rupturing the idealisation of the village.

Stephen Groening examines ideas, metaphors and fantasies about immateriality that are prevalent in cultural imaginings of media technologies. Media is frequently figured as suspended in the air that surrounds us, as electromagnetic waves, light particles and other ethereal signals. In contrast to the carefully designed material personal devices we use, the infrastructure of new media is seemingly intangible, a limitless zone of effortless

communication; in Gramsci's terms a "concrete fantasy" that disguises the materiality of labour and infrastructure. With physical boundaries absent in a supposedly unlimited atmosphere, new means of delineating borders and paths emerge, such as the bubble. Groening suggests that a "meteorology of the media" is needed to examine these atmospheric, their material context and effects, because the "repurposing of the medium of air for the purposes of communication has made contemporary media signals a form of weather."

Eleanor Sandry and Michele Willson's discussion of the "interrupt" employed in technological systems further explores the interplay between the immaterial as inconsequentiality and as that which is perceived to be non-corporeal. Lay users overlook much of the hardware, software and processes underlying their everyday use of technology, thinking it to be irrelevant and incorporeal. But when suspended or disrupted, the continual interruptions relied upon by such systems are drawn to users' attention, making them aware of systems as either interpreters or agents. This is apparent in Facebook's deployment of seamless sharing apps that allow systems to perform interrupts and share information without the user's participation, or alternatively require the user to initiate such sharing. The intrusion of previously unobtrusive systems into everyday life also widely occurred with the Y2K or millennium bug. Sandry and Willson compare the planned and unplanned incursion of software systems into a user's awareness to the interruptions of human discourse discussed by Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas, showing how they draw the presence of an Other – whether human or technological – to the fore.

Finally, in a dalliance with Sigmund Freud and Jacques Derrida, Mara Steele's performative piece enlists the relationship between telepathy, transference and telepoetics. She demonstrates the insecurity of the boundaries between matter and spirit when minds and bodies touch in psychoanalysis and the occult. An excess of communication beyond the transfer of knowledge is engaged, "the text acting as a startling, telepathic touch" that crosses selves. In considering telepathic transference, the associations between language, learning, love, jam, libido, *Alice in Wonderland* and honey bees come to be material.