

Approaching Materials: response to <http://feltacts.com/2014/12/19/29112014/>

As I understand, you bring the discussion to a consideration of how scenography - the material which creates the site and conditions of a performance - is interconnected with the action of the body. Material acts upon the body, and vice versa. The description of Bayram's *Autonomous Scenography* suggests that the interplay between prop and body may lead to what may be perceived as a melting of borders, an openness to the idea of a transformation – of solid entities (and identities) merging in and out of one another, becoming and dispersing, forming illusion and, just as fast, allowing it to fall away. I was captured by the image of the pearl of sweat dripping upon the cardboard.

Between cardboard and body, no one substance was more live than the other, and instead two forces, two things met each other, both existing separately and changing one another, mutating to transform the other.<sup>1</sup>

The performer's physical exertion was made necessary by the act of wielding costume, prop and even suspension of disbelief (in the eye of the spectator) from such a material. The sweat of the performer, a sign of exertion, affected the materiality of the cardboard, drawing our attention to its porous nature. This manner of thinking about the performer and material as mutable agents of affect upon each other is akin to recent re-evaluation of object and 'objecthood' in art. In their paper *Can Objects Perform?*, Pii and Galia Kollektiv consider the consequences of philosophies such as those posited by Bruno Latour:

[W]e can no longer simply ask the question of how the qualities of an object (say the falling rain) interact with the senses (it feels wet) – we must now ask how objects interact with each other as well (which qualities of the rain are accessible to the wet rock, for example its capacity to erode, but perhaps not other aspects of the rain like the smell it produces when hitting the earth).<sup>2</sup>

This is to decentralise perceptions of subject/object: human (feeling, emotional, sensate) versus the 'non-human'. A performer or artist may experience themselves in this way, lost in amidst their chosen materials and absorbed in the flow of action. A recent foray of my own has been to return to painting. I aim for a state of immersion. This mode, an elusive thing to generate, is characterised by a combination of spontaneity and lucid thought. It is the hallowed point at which I am most sensitive to the qualities of my materials and pliant to their tendencies. This openness allows for creative discovery. I hold in my consciousness the image that I intend to express, whilst my body and its actions are guided by the materials that I work with. Painter, paints, brushes and paper act upon each other, causing a transformation from visual idea to physical result. This is not always easy. Along the way the visual idea in mind may have to bend and respond to the possibilities of the materials in hand. Jane Bennett provides a further consideration of this:

By "vitality" I mean the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the design of humans, but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.<sup>3</sup>

At the risk of becoming naively romantic, I would suggest that this is a situation whereby the artist as an active entity becomes mutable, acted upon by the agency of their chosen materials. It could also be understood as a travelling *towards* the other, a constant quest for connection between one's self and the external world. I reach out for this connection

between arm, paintbrush, paint and paper. The paintbrush becomes an extension of my body as it touches the paper. This could be likened to the way in which the performer's body in *Autonomous Scenography* seemed to morph into different forms as it engaged in its tactile dialogue with the cardboard.

Late summer, 2011: in a large light gallery space, three panels slope outwards from the bottom of the pristine white wall, about 1.5 metres across the grey floor. The first is covered in fuzzy grey smudges that suggest the entropy of previous design. The second is marked by a line of rose coloured drips and splashes along the outer edge, some of which have strayed onto the floor. The pigment looks like it has come from a watered down ink, as it is somewhat translucent, yet retains its vibrancy. The third panel contains an imprint that is barely visible: a circle that only becomes apparent in the light of the sun from a certain angle. It is demarcated by a change in the texture of the surface of the board: a sheen inscribed upon a matt background. Something about the scale and formality of this work reminds me of Barnett Newman; the gestural brush stroke and its intersection with a geometrical form; the feeling of scale relating to body, and bodily position affecting the perception of the work. It is also something about the suggestion of symbolism in these elemental shapes – from inchoate grey matter to the never-ending line of the sphere.

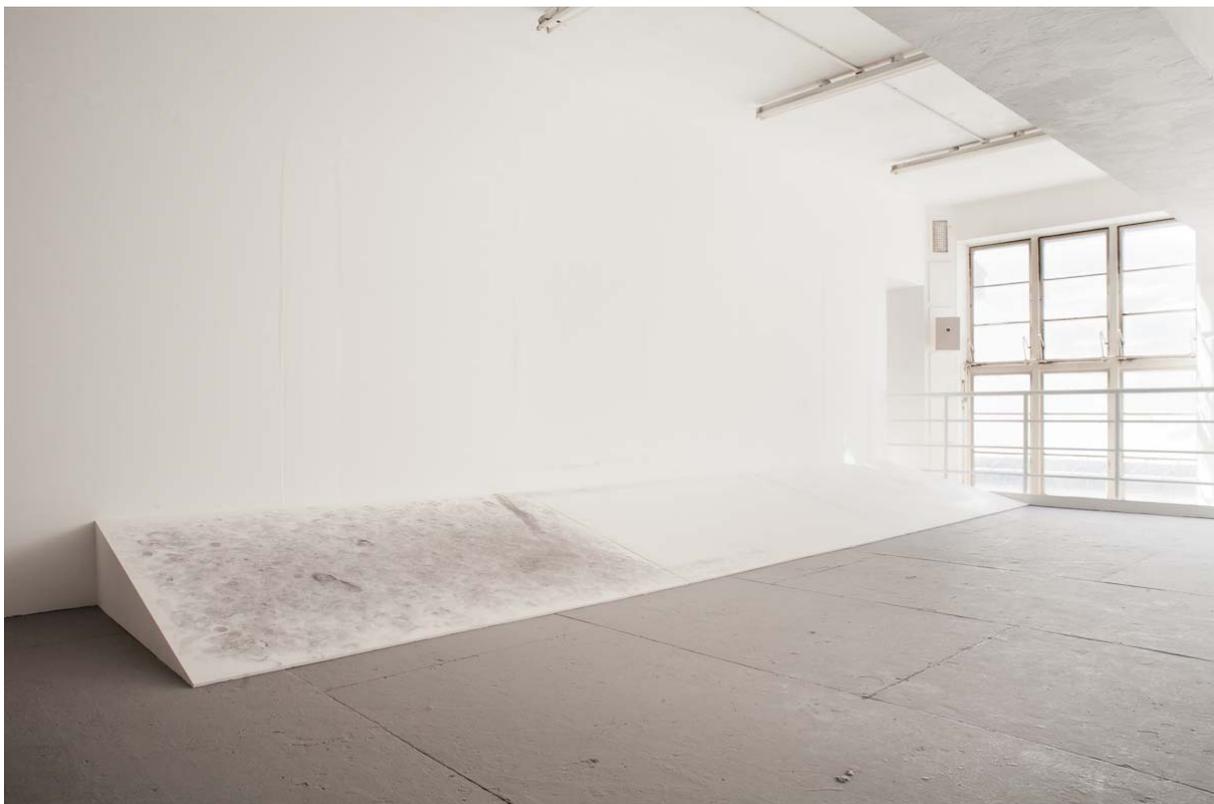


Image: Kam Wan (2011), *3 hours 16 minutes; 1 hour 8 minutes; 8 hours 3 minutes*

The title, *3 hours 16 minutes; 1 hour 8 minutes; 8 hours 3 minutes*, would not necessarily divulge the way the piece was made, although it does suggest a series of durational actions. The work is a drawing on board using graphite that in places turns into a pink ink upon contact with water (sweat). It traces action: evidence of the interplay between human body and material. A short video loop, found in an adjacent space, shows the artist performing a series of press-ups on the central board.<sup>4</sup> Each press-up is carefully and slowly executed.

The camera is angled so that our vision is aligned almost exactly with the horizontal body of the artist. We do not see him from above, but rather we look straight through the void between his body and the surface it touches. From this perspective, our sight enters into a close encounter with his struggle. The action of pressing down towards the board seems to be imbued with delicate precision. The stress upon *not touching*, and *not* laying the body down flat against the board is suggestive of reverence towards the surface. At one point, the artist can no longer bear his weight against the board, kneeling down in a position akin to that of prayer. Here we witness the exertion, and begin to understand that the pink drips are mingled particles of graphite and sweat.

Viewing this work, and imagining the experience of watching *Autonomous Scenography*, I find myself drawn to interpretations that are firstly anthropocentric, and secondly, somehow linked to the idea of transcendence. Transformation suggests transcendence: the idea of transcending matter – becoming something else. If, as in *Autonomous Scenography*, this is to inspire suspension of disbelief, then that is to encourage the transcendence of our mental faculties into seeing what it is not really there, rather than remaining grounded in the actuality of what is before our eyes. In the case of Wan's work, it is to encourage the body to transcend its usual capabilities, and by so doing, to paint the traces of this effort as the body itself becomes the brush. I cannot help but read desire into Wan's actions. In the video, his almost prostrate body is presented to us at an intimate angle. From this position, it is possible to perceive the care with which he levers himself towards, yet not quite as far as to touch, the white surface of the board.. Wan has talked of his relation to paper as one of love, seeing drawing as an infinite journey towards *jouissance*. He has written:

Drawing as a child might, with ink applied directly to my skin and transferred to the paper, I desire not only to get closer to my mediums, but crucially closer to the image. Is this not an impossible task? I am physically close to the paper's surface, my breath rebounds to caress my own cheek, the oily scent of the pigment fills my nostrils, the liquid soaking into and staining my skin, *becoming my skin*.<sup>5</sup>

To bring this back to your preceding text, I am wondering what the potential of the relationship between materials in performance (and with performer) might mean. I believe that it could draw the viewer to an inescapable empathy, in both a physical and an emotional sense. This occurs through a process of transference, whereby it is possible to imagine in a sensate way how something feels, smells, and could be to the touch. An extension of this is through our imagination. This is the anthropocentric tendency, which may find metaphors for human traits in the action, the choice of material, the way the material responds to the process of the performer, and in how the performer is guided by the properties of the material. I have mentioned a decentralisation of perception in terms of the way we read materials, but lost in material, blurring the boundary between self and other, I would suggest that we become even more closely confronted with our own nature.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://feltacts.com/2014/12/19/29112014/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.kollectiv.co.uk/Object%20Orientations.html>

<sup>3</sup> Bennett, Jane. (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham & London, p. Viii.

<sup>4</sup> <https://vimeo.com/37063213>

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<sup>5</sup> Wan, Kam. (2011) *Drawing Towards Awaited Landscapes – The Body That Loves*, Research Paper for MA Fine Art, Central Saint Martin's, London, p.20