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Book Review

***Ways of Following: Art, Materiality, Collaboration* Katve-Kaisa Kontturi**

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Theory has always been an adjunct to art, stepping in after the fact to endow a work with academic legitimacy. Yet what if theory were to become part of the nuts and bolts of art-making, able to articulate, synthesize, and push forward the creative process itself? This is where *Ways of Following* comes in: its author Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, currently Acting Professor of Art History at the University of Turku in Finland, has a background in participatory, arts-based, practice-led, feminist, and new materialist research, with a particular focus on art-writing, art-based research, and the relations between art and theory. Her book pursues these research interests, while charting her long-term encounters and engagement with the work of three contemporary women artists, offering a vivid demonstration of how a certain strand of philosophy (Deleuzian, for the most part) can accompany a specific kind of art, pointing to their interdependence and common goals.

Take, for instance, Kontturi's account of Susana Nevado's *Honest Fortune Teller* (2005), an installation addressing contemporary embodiments of Catholic imagery, in which the notion of layering or stratification is key.

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As Kontturi points out, Deleuze and Guattari regard stratification as a means of creating order from the chaos of the world, as a long-term process of creation and re-creation (57). In the same way, the thirty-five paintings and small sculptures making up Nevado's installation took many months to complete, and especially one particular painting to which she was constantly adding new layers, which she would then remove and overpaint. Yet as Deleuze and Guattari also observe, stratification is like a belt that supports but nonetheless restricts. Nevado too gradually came to feel that the layers she was continually adding were merely going over familiar ground (57-58), and she eventually rubbed the uppermost layer of the painting in question with sandpaper, so that the pinup girl figures and other readily identifiable signs in it became unrecognizable. As Kontturi writes: "Before the scrubbing, it was images and their significance in the anthropomorphic strata that governed the painting. This is what Deleuze and Guattari call the 'imperialism of the signifier' (61): in other words, the previous version of the painting, to use Kontturi's terms, "was stratified, it was stuck" (59). Yet it was nonetheless still open to being destratified and turned into art by the scrubbing process—in the same way as strata, according to Deleuze and Guattari, are never closed, but traversed by forces that change their course (57). Kontturi notes: "When something is stratified, it becomes commonplace and easy to communicate. Consequently, what was [...] called 'artwork'—art as an object of recognition and interpretation—is art that is stratified. Work of art, however, escapes the belt of stratification" (57). Of course, this does not mean that any painting can be improved by scrubbing, but rather that in this instance the creative process can be concretely and precisely described in terms of destratification, such that art emerges once recognizable givens have been produced and then overcome (65). In *Ways of Following*, philosophical insights are continually interlaced in this way with descriptions of the processes, ideas, and actions that constitute art-making, so that we grasp the art through the philosophy and the philosophy through the art – and through the black-and-white images of the works of art explored in the book, which contribute to the reader's comprehension of both the art and the text.

Ways of Following is also an account of art-making that takes stock of the contexts, actions, and materials that provide the impetus for the creative process to develop and thrive. As such, it reformulates existing artistic methodologies, replacing norms, styles, and preconceptions with such notions as openness, liveliness, and 'going with the flow'. Kontturi's own status as a 'follower' of artists exemplifies her approach, her task being not

to record the artists' pre-planned schedule but to make an active contribution to the unscripted unfolding of their working day. She writes: "[M]y technique was to 'collaborate' rather than only observe the artists working, meaning that it was critical for me to stay open to their viewpoints and ways of doing" (71). Kontturi's open-ended writing practice likewise goes with the flow, rather than just recording her own feelings: she describes it as 'writing as following', or what Marsha Meskimmon calls 'writing-with', which is an ethical mode of writing about art that offers new knowledge obtained by attending to the complexities of the work of art (11–12). In the same way, art-making itself is to be viewed not as an individualistic enterprise driven only by human agency but as a collaborative undertaking engaging the agency of the artist's materials as well, just as art too may be redefined not as a platform whereby the artist demonstrates her mastery over her materials, but as a complex assemblage of processes with its own expressive qualities that does not just comply with the artist's intentions but also exceeds them. As Kontturi points out with respect to Nevado's installation: "It was Nevado who initiated the process, but then, so to speak, the process had to take a course of its own" (83). Kontturi thus maps out an 'autonomy of process', quite different from the notion of artistic autonomy: "It is not, then, autonomy from the social or from the symbolic that I am suggesting [...] It is just that when connected in art-making, matters of art create their own mutual movement that might be called autonomous" (95).

The notion of more-than-human collaborations that exceed the presence and/or influence of humans is clearly of key importance here (18). Without disregarding the participation of humans, such co-workings—as Kontturi calls them—include the impact of light or paint, as well as the intensities of processes as such, which "count more than individuals or other clearly defined material entities" (21). Such intensities play a key part in the viewer's reception of art, as in the example of the swirling, rotating beams of coloured light issuing from Helena Hietanen's installation *Heaven Machine* (2005–2006). The beams provoke in the viewer temporary loss of vision and disruptions of her sense of balance, impacting the functioning of the body in a manner that is no longer just material but material-relational: "What the encounter with *Heaven Machine* suggests is that when works of art are seen merely as passive 'battlefields' for representation and interpretation, their potential lines of flight, their material-relational capacity to change and move thinking is easily missed" (45). For all these reasons, Kontturi's approach is not just a 'method' of art-making but a 'way', for 'method' implies

pre-determination and regularity, whereas 'way' has more to do with process and ongoing becoming (16). She writes: "In this way, in the way of following, the beams of light do not affirm a certain life, not the life of Hietanen, nor more generally a Christian way of life, but an indefinite life not restricted by the juxtaposition of 'here and now' and 'hereafter'" (44).

Yet despite its qualities, the book leaves a number of questions unanswered. Is Kontturi's approach, based as it is on an absence of preconceptions or goals, applicable to all kinds of art or just the works described in the book? Portrait painting, for instance, would seem to be dependent on some form of likeness, while conceptual and minimal art are defined in accordance with relatively stable criteria. The book also raises questions with regard to the philosophies on which it draws: for over and above Deleuze and Guattari, there are references to new materialist philosophers such as Jane Bennett and Elizabeth Grosz. Grosz's emphasis on vibration as a fundamental component of life, and on the imperceptible movements and shifts challenging the apparent solidity of things is ideally suited to exploring the nuances of process art (40) (191). Yet in the long term, it challenges the very notion of art. How is the viewer to relate to a work if it is continually changing? Does a de-stratified work also undergo change to the point where it might once again become stuck after a certain amount of time? And if art must be bereft of preconceptions, how are we to distinguish it from non-art? Finally, another new materialist assertion—that there are no individuals but only an interconnected network of human and non-human actions and entanglements—poses problems for the above-mentioned claims concerning the autonomy of processes and materials.

Yet many of these omissions exceed the book's scope. Consequently, they do not jeopardize its strongest claims: its insistence on the relatedness of philosophy and art and their capacity to support and strengthen each other's assumptions, on the key role of more-than-human factors in art-making, and on the important contribution of feminist art-making to these goals. The book thus addresses not only philosophers engaging with Deleuze, but also—and especially—artists, art theorists, feminists, and new materialists, as well as students of humanities disciplines more generally.

Not only do publications exploring new materialist thinking and analysis in the field of contemporary art address diverse readerships, but they also take different forms: compared to such noteworthy edited volumes as *Realism Materialism Art* (eds Cox, Jaskey, Malik, Sternberg Press 2015), and *Power of Material/Politics of Materiality* (eds Witzgall, Stakemeier, The Uni-

versity of Chicago Press 2018), Kontturi's contribution is a full-length book. As she reminds us, art (and presumably writing too) must constantly renew itself, and such is indeed the case of the art (and the writing) she defends: "Art addresses what we may become. It keeps offering new flows of process to follow and stucknesses to attend to, and therefore, also, new sensations to encounter and conceptions to create" (202).

