MARIA LOMPE

Nicolaus Copernicus University
Doctoral School of Humanities, Theology and Arts
Philosophy Department
e-mail: maria.lompe@doktorant.umk.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-4395-1151

CEZARY WICHER

University of Wrocław
Faculty of Historical and Pedagogical Sciences Cultural Studies
e-mail: czarek@wrocenter.pl
ORCID: 0000-0001-8048-0128

Materiality of visuality. About relationships and transformations of visuality and politics

Abstract. *In the hazy anthropocene era, which M. Chaberski (2019) understood as a serious epistemological crisis, even wider than the climate crisis, visuality plays a very important role -it becomes a vector for visibility and invisibility of discursive and non-discursive practices. The spirit of new materialism has developed a number of concepts, which emphasized non-linguistic ways of shaping meanings and interpretations of reality, and at the same time appreciated non-humans agencies. The article is constructed around the thesis "visual is material," because in the end every representation refers to the materials, on which our world is build. We can treat this thesis as a political statement, following J. Ranciere observations, that the thought is material (2007). We would like to analyze the significance of materiality by taking a look at media art practices. We can sink into the thicket of connections between materials and track the journey of things, not focusing on the final effect (manufactured item), but rather on manufacturing process (Ingold 2019; Deleuze, Guattari 2015).*

Keywords: *visuality, materiality, new materialism, follow the material, media art*

The observed and well described[1] as new materialism turn in humanities is a continuation of the post-structural school of humanities, which in a nutshell could be defined by an attempt to incorporate considerations from the science field into the circulation of humanities, to implement current statements,[2] to make the discourse more flexible, and at the same time to turn to variously understood matter and materiality, which, according to the apologists of this discourse, would be silent within the framework of post-structuralism and linguistic turn. Without trying to get involved in the current debates, we would like, using some of the tools of the new materialism philosophy, to look at artistic practices in which, in our opinion, materials and materiality are indeed forgotten. Therefore the nodal point of the article becomes the materiality of visuality, the materiality of what stands behind images, or more broadly, aesthetics.

1. Materials in the Rancière's philosophy of perception

The theses of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière will be a very handy signpost as to how to treat the materiality of visuality and why it is important to pay attention to this very factor in the context of contemporary new materialism philosophies. Rancière, as a philosopher who is a Marxist spirit, which is an essential element of his theory, conceptualizes his ideas in the category of the distribution of the sensible. Referring to time and space, the essential characteristics of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, which define sensual experience, he does not stop at them, because the most important for the concept of French philosophy are visibility and audibility, i.e. perceivability in the social world, and leading to the end of his thought, it is about the limits of what one can think of reality. Let us also remember that the author of *The Future of Image* in the circulation of meanings in the social sphere assigns political significance to each creative act – a poem or an abstract image can re-evaluate the political scene, i.e. the sphere of visibility, just like a legal act. In *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* we read: "The distribution of the sensible I call the system of perceptible certainties, which make visible both the common and the divisions, defining within it particular places and parts."[3]

[1] In the Polish humanities there is a growing interest in new materialism, either because of the translations of works relevant to this trend, or because of the new publications being produced. See *Feministyczne nowe materializmy. Usytuowane kartografie*, ed. O. Cielemska, M. Rogowska-Stangret, Lublin 2018; R. Dolphjin, I. van der Tuin, *Nowy materializm. Wywiady i kartografie*, transl. by J. Czajka, A. Handke, J. Maliński, A. Marcisz, C. Rudnicki and T. Wiśniewski, Gdańsk–Poznań–Warszawa 2018.

[2] Karen Barad, a theoretical physicist, has based her concept of intra-action on her knowledge of the sciences.

[3] J. Rancière, *Dzielenie postrzegalnego. Estetyka i polityka*, transl. J. Sowa, Ha!art, Kraków 2007, p. 69.

Rancière, writing about various forms of activity, does not explicitly touch upon the essential element in the negotiation of meanings, which are materials – he points, admittedly, to the transformations that typographic changes in the space of a modern poem bring for the visuality, for example, placing poetry on a white, empty sheet of paper, but does not put a clear accent on the side of the circulation of meanings coming out of matter, contact with it. This is what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write about in *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* when they understand "a work of art as a block of impressions, that is, a combination of affections and percepts."[4] Sensibility, as that sphere which, in Rancière's work after Kant, is the source of cognition, is at the same time meaningful (which is contained in the ambiguity of the title *Le Partage du sensible* – from French sensible as sense, but also as meaning). The production of meanings is a weave, a dialectic work on the level of material and sensuality, which is not abstracted from outside reality, but reacts to the incoming stimuli of perception,[5] that is, for Rancière, different ways of seeing and invisibility.

Therefore, in the analysis of artistic practices, we try to pay attention to the materials, to the things that have been used for creative activity and that theme it, to their history, because they are an essential part of the production of meanings, and within the artistic activity they seem to be transparent as part of a larger, visual-textual content, they become a kind of tool, not a producer of meaning in the world; Therefore, the thesis about the materiality of what is visual is a part of the new humanistic currents that value the negotiation of modus between different entities, with different ontological status, without denying the explicit intentionality of the works of art contained in a specific author, which we derive from Rancière, who writes that artistic practices are "modes of action" that interfere with the general division of modes of action and their relation to modes of being and forms of visibility.[6] Aesthetics is quite clearly in touch here with politics (the works analysed further on can be described as "political" because they deal with the distribution of perceptions, both serious social problems and marginalised actors of social life – the division of time and space[7] is at the basis of aesthetics, and politics manifests itself as a sphere in which different actors appear, but it is also a place of marginalisation and silence).

Explaining the relationship between aesthetics and politics is extremely important in order to determine the position in which we are following Rancière – this is not why we are making an attempt to analyze the materiality of visuality, because

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[4] G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Co to jest filozofia?*, transl. P. Pieniążek, słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 2000, p. 181.

[5] Ł. Andrzejewski writes more widely about perception in Ranciere's philosophy. See Andrzejewski, *Zobaczyć to, co polityczne. Filozofia politycznej postrzegalności według Jacques'a Rancière'a*, Universitas, Kraków 2019.

[6] J. Rancière, *Dzielenie postrzegalnego…*, p. 70.

[7] Ibidem.

within its framework we can analyze aesthetically presented political actions, but because thinking about matter as an essential and component point of what we see is excluded from speaking about visuality. It is therefore an attempt at a certain revision in the conceptualisation of artistic activities. That is why we want to complement Rancière's thought with other modalities to shift the point of view from this theoretical constellation. Let us, however, look at the fresher attempts to define visibility.

2. Image Behind the Fog

Analyses of visuality in discursive contexts area well-recognized practice, particularly those based on the work of Michael Foucault in the (bio)power perspective,[8] or visuality and countervisuality in Mirzoeff's postcolonial "right to look" context.[9] Also, the turn towards art analysis in post-humanist research[10] or embedding it in the climate crisis is already a well-established perspective that connects to the broad current of the so-called "new humanities." Visual arts in the context of hybrid relationships between the natural and the artificial, as well as the real and the virtual have already been analyzed by Anna Nacher, focusing on the analysis of media art with a particular emphasis on its post-digital, techno-ecological practices.[11] In this case, the relationship between the natural and the artificial is blurred, and various ontological orders (discursive, physical, virtual) are intermingled.

An interesting suggestion in this context is offered by Mateusz Chaberski, who shifts the focus from discursive or posthuman ontological analysis to an analysis of the epistemological thread that concerns the condition of contemporary society and art. Arguing with the existing propositions of understanding so called "cenes" (Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene), which for central problem diagnosed the worked out by us economic system, the ways in which we distributing goods or transforming the world, Chaberski in *Asamblaże, asamblaże. Doświadczenie w zamglonymantropocenie*, for the main axle chose uncertainty – especially the one which accompany the production of expertise knowledge. Hazy Anthropocene era in Chaberski opinion is not "ecological but rather epistemological"[12] crisis –

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[8] W.J.T Mitchell, *Cloning Terror. The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London 2011; W.J.T Mitchell, *What do pictures want. The lives and loves of images*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago–London 2004.

[9] N. Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, Duke University Press, Durham 2011.

[10] M. Bakke, *Bio-trasnfiguracje. Sztuka i estetyka posthumanizmu*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2015.

[11] A. Nacher, *The Techno-Ecological Practice as the Politics of Ontological Coalitions*, "Acoustic Space" 2019, vol. 17.

[12] M. Chaberski, *Asamblaże, asamblaże. Doświadczenie w zamglonym antropocenie*, Wydawnictwo Księgarnia Akademicka, Kraków 2019, p. 18.

which cleary shifts the problem posed by the mainstream narrative related to the climate crisis, from the undesirable effects of our actions, to the ways of learning and producing knowledge about the world around us. *Episteme* in Chaberski's conception cleary links with seeing, which suppose to provide us about the certainties of cognition, while "hazing" in the *Asamblaże* author's proposition plays a double role. It combines the uncertainty feeling, which compagne a common experiences in Anthropocene era, being in the same time a pictorial description of that uncertainty.

It is both about the uncertainty of the causes and effects of such phenomena as "Great Smog of London" and uncertainty of human experience related with that phenomena – as which a mysterious fog on English beaches in the Birling Gap.[13] However Chaberski does not stopped on seeing Anthropocene through the lens of phenomena, which caused social panic and the consequences in terms of death from sulphates that are invisible to the naked eye. He is trying also to take art into consideration; the uncertainty that accompanies the analysis of a wide variety of artistic works selected by Chaberski, fits into the context of a relatively new philosophical trend – new materialism. The researcher focuses primarily on questioning the view on the representation of reality by various representations, while paying particular attention to the sphere of materiality and the development of new ontologies.

Title assemblages in Chaberski's book have been taken from Manuel DeLanda works in which the assemblages specified relations between human and non-human actors and between bottom-up and top-down social institutions.[14] World in these perspective is not determined by one hegemonic actor, but is rather composed by network full of accidental relations created between various actors, which are next stabilized. Because it is hard to capture the essence of specific events, it is rather about the links between them, which created specific situations. In another words, assemblage are "a multiplicity of heterogeneous elements."[15] However Chaberski added to DeLanda perspective, significant in his opinion, human experience, which is created under the assemblage's splices.

Although Chaberski's proposition is not new in terms of theoretical knowledge – experts knowledge creations and technocratic model of contemporary state is the object of criticism of many fields in contemporary humanities, starting of environmental humanities, through sociology, postcolonial anthropology, or science technology studies. There are also many works dedicated to unwanted side effects that kind of cognitive attitude. However, Chaberski focuses on implementation this basic assumption into research dedicated to human experience during reception of contemporary performative art. This, as he wrote, "amodal" human experience, which is creating as a weave of many senses, "human body and it's experience,"

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[13] Ibidem, p. 41.
[14] Ibidem, p. 23.
[15] Ibidem, p. 144.

Picture 1–3. Where All Problems End

Source: W. Wysocka, *Where All Problems End/ Mupedzanhano*, www.weronikawysocka.com/ photography/where-all-problems-end-mupedzanhamo/ [access: 27.05.2020].

become a starting point to reflection about "human experience in the context of anthropogenic environmental changes that we are dealing with today."[16]

Interested for us visuality of artistic works is only a starter point to the experience assembled with other human senses. Chaberski emphasized it, when he described tactile sensations, which he felt during watching the registration of *Circumventive Organs* operations carried out on artificial organs: "My sight allows me to 'touch' the moist mucus covering the organs."[17] We can register similar experience during watching Weronika Wysocka work – "Where All Problems End/ Mupedzanhamo."[18] The artist register interior of sorting used clothes. While watching production lines with the tones of clothing, it's easy to feel almost physical characteristic smell, that rises in second-hand shops. However, that perspective would be extremely banal if we would left it on this level only. Admonition of relations between all of us senses can not serve only appreciating our way of experience reality. We think rather that visuality plays a very important role – it becomes a vector for visibility and invisibility of discursive and non-discursive practices. So let us shift our attention to materiality in Wysocka's work. In this context Wysocka's work rather represent migration of materials considered to be worn out for ones, to become a new form of acquisition for others. Documentation of worn clothes' flow, the work done during sorting them and they ways of naming this type of clothes is significant not only in the local perspective, but also in the global one. It shows in direct way such allen compassing mechanisms as capitalism, postcolonialism, power relations or modern geopolitics.

Further fate of sorting clothes become a covered context – they can arrived to Africa, which become a place of sales things unnecessary for West. This types of capital flow, from the center to periphery, the very particular capital which is clothing, has shaken local African economies that prefer buying cheap clothing rather than focusing on local production. It leads to the independence of local economy from the external conditions. Creating of Africans narration about meeting with western clothes become important too. The language tried to keep up with the things, by specifying them as "dead white man clothes" or the titled "where all problems end." The end of all problems is blocking the potential for critical thinking about reality and changing the current status, getting used to the relationship and its further exploitation.

Moreover, Wysocka choosed very specific way of visualisation the segregation and processing of used clothes, because of the materials she followed. Visuality "from above," criticized by Nicholas Mirzoeff Visuality, and recalled by Chaberski,

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[16] Ibidem, p. 42.

[17] Ibidem, pp. 174–175.

[18] W. Wysocka, *Where All Problems End/ Mupedzanhano*, www.weronikawysocka.com/ photography/where-all-problems-end-mupedzanhamo/ [access: 27.05.2020].

Picture 4–5. Green White Orange Composition

Source: T. Nogalski, *Green White Orange Composition*, available here: www.vimeo.com/20568
0938 [access: 27.05.2020].

is significant also in this context. Countervisuality proposed by Mirzoeff[19] value
this ways of visuality, which allows to distinction between causes and effects or
the levels from which came particular visual representation.

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[19] M. Chaberski, *Asamblaże, asamblaże…*, p. 194.

Also Tymon Nogalski used visualisation from a bird's eye view during registration the coast of Greek Island – Lesbos,[20] which still is the hub for refugees coming to Europe, emphasizing in this way colonial dependencies. Short Nogalski's video based on smooth transmission between lush vegetation of Greek island and a pile of life jackets, debris and trash forming a huge mountain in the middle of the coast. Similar to "Where All Problems End," tracking the materials left on the island is the starting point to show the scale of the problem of illegal migration, precariousness and finally the policy of the modern European community. Left life jackets, which become the representation of the former presence of human body, become unnecessary ballast in the beginning of next stage of journey. In the same time they interfere into the island architecture, from which previous pictures known from the postcards gone. In the field of visibility appeared bodies fighting for better live, leaving behind waste as a track of their presence.

3. Following the material

This extraordinary focus on materiality, valuing the material as a kind of political potential – the thing in which, as it were, the uses and thus the possibilities of political representation are inscribed is presented by Tim Ingold.

In the collection of Ingold's essays *Splatając otwarty świat* we can look at the researcher's turn towards materials beginning with a review of contemporary Anthropology and Humanities, which so far considered materiality only as abstract concepts. Admittedly, materiality was subject to deep theoretical reflection, hoverer it was never linked with palpable, physical materials, which make up the reality that surround us. As Ingold argued: "The source of the problem lies again in slipping from material to materiality. It is the root of our assumption that people, when entering and leaving rooms, live alternately inside and outside the material world. It is as if this world is a piece of emental cheese, full of holes and yet closed in half of its outer surface."[21] Instead of falling into the materiality trap, Ingold propose rather tracking the relations between particular creations and them material timber. Following the principle "things are in life, not life in things," anthropologist payed attention to a different way of understanding the animism, which in the "classic" anthropology was rather a simple explanation of different ontologies. While Ingold declare that, he want to "treat the materials seriously, because from them everything is made."[22] It might seem like Ingold is sympathising with Relationism, because

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[20] T. Nogalski, *Green White Orange Composition*, available here: www.vimeo.com/205680938 [access: 27.05.2020].

[21] T. Ingold, *Splatając otwarty świat*, transl. E. Klekot, Instytut Architektury, Kraków 2018, p. 16.

[22] Ibidem, pp. 32–33.
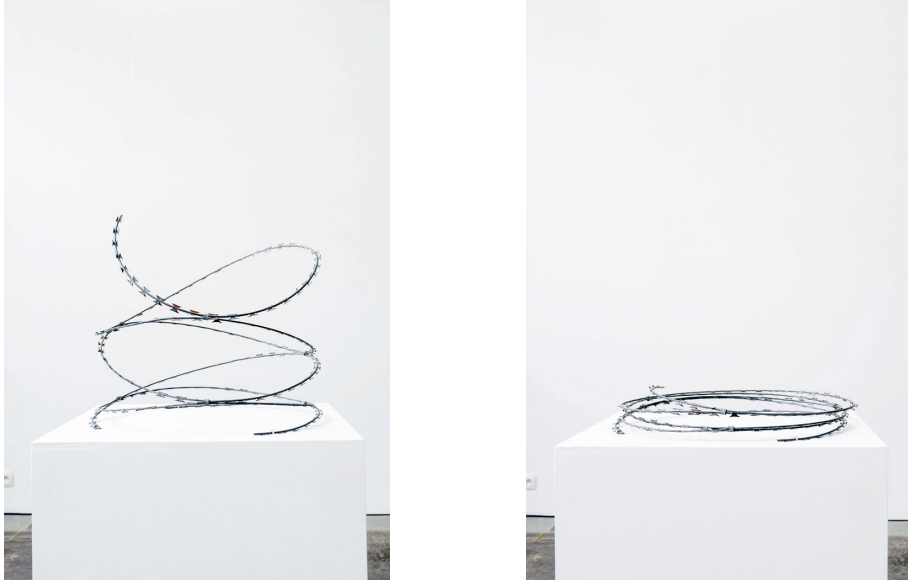
Picture 6–7. Smart Fence

Source: D. Ploeger, *Smart Fence*, available here: www.daniploeger.org/smart-fence-1 [access: 27.05.2020].

he refer to James Gibson's ecological theory,[23] who emphasized relation between the sense of sights and the people and animals environment. In this case Ingold's essays wouldn't be anything more, than an application Bruno Latour's relational sociology to the material research, and so conglomerate of new materialism and Actor-Network Theory. However Ingold made a step forward, clearly abstaining from relationism. As he arguing relationism need to invert every single thing, that to establish a relation, first of all have to become a separate entity.[24] Moreover Ingold criticised attributing agency to things. As he explained using an example of cat door: "Neither the door nor the cat have agency; they are rather possessed by action."[25]

In this context we could consider the isolation of technology presented by Dani Ploeger in project "Smart Fence."[26] Although the barbed wire currently used to separate national borders was used to prevent the movement of illegal immigrants, Ploeger specially exhibited his work in the museum space without referring to its seemingly inextricable part – the human body. This treatment emphasises first of

[23] Ibidem, p. 75.
[24] Ibidem, p. 90.
[25] Ibidem, p. 131.
[26] D. Ploeger, *Smart Fence*, available here: www.daniploeger.org/smart-fence-1 [access: 27.05.2020].

all thinking about this kind of technology in the category of neutrality, which in a way disperses the potential for violence inherent in this kind of solutions. Fence visualisation and it's way of work emphasized first of all material from which it is made, and in opposition to Ingold's view it's political agencies. Although Ingold also want to follow the material, however he is not focuses at the relations between different actors, but rather on specific material's properties.[27] It seems that Pleger treat in this way the fences scattered across the European countries, that match the purpose of the wire and razor blades.

For the purpose of his analysis, Ingold recall Annamarie Mol's i John Law's topology of "liquid space," which do not have "precisely defined objects or entities."[28] That topology seems close to the assemblage concept, which Chaberski use to describe the experiences of contemporary performative art and anthropocene. Hybrid models, which we can watch in Diana Lelonek's work "Center for the Living Things,"[29] create that kind of assemblages or "fluid spaces." Things abandoned in illegal dumps become covered with moss and vegetation, which created "hybrids of plants and artificial objects."[30] So, as in the Wysocka work, this time also things doomed to uselessness are somehow recorded in the middle of process of creating new ontologies. Old wellies, fragments of hard wires, shoes, butter packs or a mop, which become excluded from the main field of visuality, were inhabited by new colonizers – moses and bacteria. The materiality of rubbish is usually treated as invisible, through the practice of pushing what is considered unaesthetic on the verge of visibility. Meanwhile, Lelonek shows that the materials from which we make everyday objects have a huge political load, both in terms of their production and subsequent disposal. The hybridical status of "The Living Things" admittedly shows that the we "can't definitively divide economic or social processes from so-called natural process."[31]

The analysis proposed by us does not end here – the appreciation of the materials that make up the visual and artistic story of a work of art should surround wider circles of analysis, as well as thinking about artistic practices as places of negotiation of the status of an artist and his work. It happens more and more often within the framework of new media art, to attempt to conceptualize the ontological equalization of the status of a work of art and an artist, forgetting about the categories that are still circulating and setting the tone for artistic discourse, and thus setting pawns in the sphere of perception, blocking emancipatory potentials. The use of analyses presented by Chaberski, which shift the focus from the intertwined
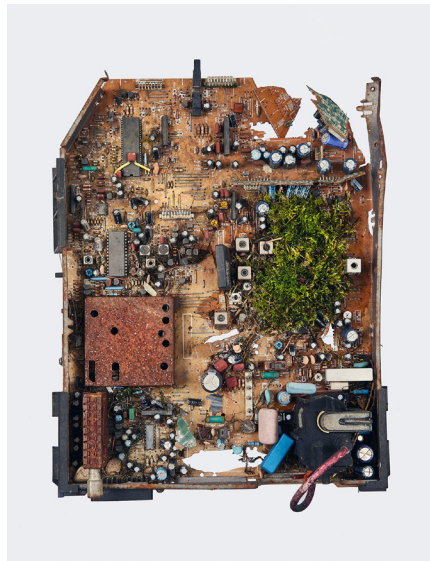
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[27] T. Ingold, *Splatając otwarty świat*, pp. 124–127.

[28] Ibidem, p. 90.

[29] D. Lelonek, *Center for The Living Things*, available here: http://dianalelonek.com/portfolio/center-for-the-living-things/ [access: 27.05.2020].

[30] Ibidem.

[31] Ibidem.

Picture 8–10. Center for the Living Things

Source: D. Lelonek, *Center for the Living Things*, http://dianalelonek.com/portfolio/center-for-the-living-things/ [access: 27.05.2020].

ontological statuses to the epistemological aspects of a given work, seem to be an interesting way of "unpacking" art in the context of feelings of uncertainty. The tangle between epistemological contexts and new materialism, however, expands this approach. The focus on the material, which is treated as a kind of political potential, allows for an appreciation of the materiality of a given work, not only in the context of "amodal" experience, but also in a discursive perspective.

Mieke Bal's call that it is "objects co-perform analysis,"[32] so often overlooked in the study of manifestations of visual culture, remains in force. The focus on the co-performance of meaning by the objects of study shift us towards thinking about the materiality of the visibility, emphasizing both the processuality and temporality of the process of seeing itself, which is of no small importance for realizing the hybridity of the spheres that make up the field of visibility. Matter actively shapes the production of meaning and the ways in which visibility is constructed – it operates within the framework of intra-actions, ruling out determinism, while simultaneously reinforcing the relationality and entanglement from which objects and subjects of analysis emerge.

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[32] M. Bal, *Wizualny esencjalizm i przedmiot kultury wizualnej*, transl. M. Bryl, „Artium Quaestiones" 2006, no. XVII, p. 327.

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