Concrete Cracks – Tracing Material Movements
The Art of Ken'Ichiro Taniguchi

Holger Hartung

This essay deals with questions of how we perceive materials, and what kind of agency materials might have on their own. Departing from the current discourses on "new materialism" and "post-humanism," I will approach this thematic field from a slightly different perspective, quite literally from the sidelines, by focusing on the gaps around and within these discourses. The starting point and silent referent of this presentation will be figures of cracks, fissures, ruptures, tears – i.e. these raw, material openings, which in German would be subsumed under the term "Risse." The question here becomes: Can we call them things? Or even things that dance?

In the following, I would like to consider cracks, fissures, ruptures, tears (in walls, cloth, paper, or in the concrete) as *performative figures* that have a complex relation with materiality and with movement, while at the same time are neither of these: neither material as such, nor movement as such, at least not fully nor all the time. What makes these figures so interesting is the fact that they can be still, silent, unnoticed for a long, seemingly endless time, and all off of a sudden, they move and spread at an incredible speed. Unexpectedly, they break, or tear through the material in which they are embedded, opening up the surface, forcefully bringing attention to the aging processes or even to the general transforming nature of materials. They can begin as a fine hairline, grow and grow, and in the end cause planes to crash, or all kinds of edifices to collapse, like bridges, houses etc. Sometimes they can be stopped, filled, fixed or cut out, or eventually their spreading stops by itself and they become motionless again – remaining like this for who knows how long. In this sense, I propose to consider cracks, ruptures, tears as *latent* material movements.

Latency, as I understand it here, can refer to both the duration of standstill as well as our relative perceptual unawareness of these figures. Latency, according to Stephanie Diekmann and Thomas Kurana, "addresses a specific way of being of entities, that is connected to a form of indirect or delayed perceptibility and can be addressed only in a complex way" (Diekmann/Kurana 2007: 11, transl. by the

author). Thus, latency is a twofold category, it is spatial and temporal, bridging the gap between perceptual and physical worlds.

Ruptures as material phenomena can be considered two-fold as well, or, literally double-sided: they are usually understood as growing structures, consisting of the drifting apart of two sides, but we could also look at ruptures as the in-between spaces that hold the sides together. Viewed as potential or latent material movements they are indicative of tensions that cause a specific material dynamic, while we usually prefer to consider material as inert, stabile, and fixed. However, as Jane Bennett reminds us, materials are vibrant and have an impact on their surroundings, including humans. "Thing-Power," according to Bennett, is "the curious ability of inanimate things to act, to produce effects, dramatic and subtle" (Bennett 2010: 6). Materials are in constant flux and transformation, while inertness is a construction that helps us to bring stability into our everyday life (at least so we think).

Cracks, ruptures, tears can be a reminder of such a constant material transformation, i.e. that all material constantly moves, as it gathers moisture, it gets cold, warm, it dries, it builds up inner-material tension, it ages, it cracks. Often, however, the material movements take place in such a way, in such a rhythm that we cannot perceive it – they happen either too slow or too fast or too brief for immediate observation. Even though we might not be (constantly) aware of it, materials and their processes of transformation have an impact on their surroundings and on us. Philosopher and physicist Karen Barad calls these processes "intra-action," underlining the entanglement of various forces, human and non-human. For her, material intra-action, different from interaction, does not presume the prior existence of independent entities, and includes material forces as well as discursive practices – and perhaps we should add artistic practices as well: "In summary, the universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming. The primary ontological units are not 'things' but phenomena – dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations" (Barad 2003: 818).

Both Bennett's and Barad's approaches seem relevant here, as cracks, fissures and ruptures occupy an ambivalent status between being a "thing" and material becoming. If we consider them as a thing in the sense of an issue, a discourse, we should ask, when and how do they come to the fore, when do we notice them and how do we refer to them? With regard to materiality and its intra-active becoming on the other hand the question arises, how can we observe their impact on and exchange with surrounding structures? What kind of effects do they produce, how are these figures situated within discourses, and how do they affect us?

In a 2012 TV commercial for Hornbach, a German chain of hardware stores, their advertising agency constructed a short, slightly uncanny narrative around the double figure of a "crack" or rupture: At the end of a school day, a teacher is

troubled by a strange physical pain, caused by something that is happening in or around his home (as the editing suggests). When he urgently rushes home, he finds a crack in the front façade of his house. As the viewers then suddenly realize, the crack has produced a strange "twin" or "branch" at the back of his neck – a petrified "wound" that widens and narrows as the teacher breathes in and out while he is silently gazing at the crack in the wall.

The "crack" in this short, speechless narrative is more than a simple metaphor, simply (but not only) because of its double occurrence. Communicating across the distance, the two cracks are drawn toward each other in an urban choreography, an intimate *pas de deux*, forming an uncanny connection between animate body and inanimate house entangled in intra-activity. Indeed, we could ask how the house in which we have grown up has influenced our corporeality and bodily development, how the house is part of our memory, our body, how we know certain staircases by heart or find the light-switch in the bathroom without looking. Eventually, we could be reminded, how certain cracks in the wall or tears in the wallpaper have sparked our imagination as a child before institutions started to direct our attention elsewhere, and we learned to "stay focused." This example might illustrate what complex dynamics ruptures may unfold as performative figures, moving between tangible materiality and symbolic function.

In the following, I propose to further examine "cracks" under the premise of "things that dance" through the work of visual artist Ken'Ichiro Taniguchi. For the past twenty years Taniguchi has been drawn to cracks in the streets of various cities in the world, one of them Berlin, where he maintains a studio in his apartment. Taniguchi brings attention to cracks or ruptures in the ground, giving these street-figures, which are usually considered as a mere sign of material decay in need of fixing, an aesthetic value. For this, he has developed a complex artistic process that results in delicate, three-dimensional objects, usually yellow, with a peculiar form, sometimes tiny, sometimes huge in size (compared to human proportions). Let us briefly glance at the elaborate artistic process and craftsmanship with which these objects and their meandering contours come into being.

After seeking out a spot that provokes him, Taniguchi covers the area of his interest with a transparent plastic sheet and begins to trace the outlines of the crack in the ground. He calls these spots *hecomi*, a Japanese expression that signifies different kinds of indentations or damaged areas, usually on surfaces. He brings these tracings into the studio, where he cuts them out, re-traces them, transfers the form to a special plastic material, then begins to cut out the form a second time, with the help of numerous special tongs, pliars, scissors, and electric drills. The degree of detail and accuracy in the resulting object seems as impressive as the perseverance with which Taniguchi devotes his time and labor to these figures.

Movement – whether or not we want to call it dance – is involved on many levels of this process. First, we could say that the selection process, guiding Tani-

guchi's subjective like or dislike of certain cracks, depends on movement. Perhaps he is drawn to some of the cracks due to the specific arrangement within the urban surrounding, perhaps out of certain pragmatism, considering where he can go to work without being disturbed. In any case, the cracks function as a kind of preexisting "script" that guides Taniguchi through the city like a *flaneur*; they configure a form of material "exscription" (Nancy 2008: 11), a pre- or de-scription of an "unreadable path," in the sense of de Certeau (1984: 93), which initiates the artist's movement in and through the city. In other words, the ruptures can be read as a kind of preexisting choreographic score. With his flaneuresque strolling through the city, Taniguchi's work is reminiscent not only of post-war artists like the French Situationists (especially Guy Debord, who established the concept of "drifting," *la dérive*) but more specifically of the Affichistes, with artists like Jacques Villeglé, who collected and exhibited torn, multilayered posters. In direct comparison, however, Taniguchi's *hecomi* studies focus less on the dissolving symbolic levels of images and typography rather than on the materiality of the pavement itself. Also different from the Affichistes is Taniguchi's persistent attention toward the origin of his *hecomis*. In a central moment in Taniguchi's artistic process, he brings back his objects to their "source."

Fig. 1: Ken'Ichiro Taniguchi tracing a hecomi. *Photo by Ken'ichiro Taniguchi sculpture studio.*

It seems to be a rather private (albeit well-documented) moment, when Taniguchi "introduces" the crafted sculpture to the crack in the ground, the positive print to the negative blueprint, the copy (copy's copy) to the template. Whereas this moment of "fitting," as he calls it, has been interpreted as a symbolic healing of "wounds in the urban tissue" (Alsen/Heinsohn 2014:16), I would rather understand the fitting as a moment of acknowledging the "co-authorship" of the crack and the various influences, tensions and movements that have caused it. The cracks come into being as a movement of and within the material itself, a substantial transformation, a release of tensions that could be caused by weather, by the weight of cars or people crossing the pavement, the construction work around the corner, the vibration from the subway nearby, frozen rain, the broom sweeping across the ground, or snow shovels, but also by growing plants and roots that seek their way through the concrete. In short: they are caused by an assemblage of human and non-human forces, an interweaving of movements produced by a range of "actants," to use Bruno Latour's term (1996: 373), which as Bennett reads it, is something that "has efficacy, something that can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events" (2010: viii). Taniguchi's art functions as a fine sensorium that registers and translates these diverse movements. Through acts of mapping, Taniguchi very pragmatically marks the points of origin of his *hecomis* on a map in order to be able to return there and also to allow his visitors to make a geographical connection between the gallery, where they might encounter the sculptures, and their "source."

Fig. 2: Hecomi *fitting. Photo: Ken'ichiro Taniguchi sculpture studio.*

Furthermore, the *hecomi* tracings themselves have a striking resemblance to city maps, especially of those cities that have been "growing" organically according to the shape of the surrounding landscape, perhaps alongside rivers, valleys, mountains etc. The movement of riverbeds for example, which often enough changes over time, especially when they are not straightened out by human intervention, seems to take an organic rupture-like course. In an eye-opening study titled *Lines* (2008), anthropologist Tim Ingold criticizes the conventional, almost naturalized equation of lines with straightness as a (violent) program of modernity and industrialization. Straightness has slowly become an imperative, whether we look at urban planning or hetero-normativity, involving various power structures.

> In place of the infinite variety of lines – and lives – with which we are presented in phenomenal experience, we are left with just two grand classes: lines that are straight and lines that are not. The first are associated with humanity and Culture, the second with animality and Nature. (Ingold 2008: 154 f.)

Compared to straight lines, cracks and ruptures, with their zigzagging course, their organic widening and closing, as well as their unpredictable stop and go, follow a fundamentally different logic, producing a different kind of aesthetic. They are deeply connected to the organic structure of the material through which they run (think, for example, of tearing out a photo from a newspaper). An equivalent to such "organic," inner-material movement could be found in a special mode of walking, which Ingold calls "wayfaring," i.e. navigation without maps (2008: 15-16). Different from the rational knowledge of maps, wayfaring is more connected to a corporeal knowledge and its oral transmission – linked to the specific quality of the landscape. Wayfaring means travelling *through* a landscape rather than across it, it implies a connection between the one travelling and the area they are in: "Wayfaring, I believe, is the most fundamental mode by which living beings, both human and non-human, inhabit the earth" (2008: 81). This description can be transferred to the zigzagging movement of tears, crack and ruptures I argue, while on the other hand we would have the instrumental cut, which runs in a straight line, regardless of the material structure through which it runs. Taniguchi's maps, however are a strange mix of these two logics, somehow complicating the difference between straight map-based point-to-point navigation and the organic line of wayfaring. They do give an overview, yet on the other hand they are entirely based on the inner-material movements of cracks.

In Taniguchi's work, movement is central in at least two further respects. Asked about the fitting, Taniguchi confidently explains that he hardly ever has to correct the resulting sculptures – they would usually fit quite exactly, as far as his precise technical process is concerned. However, in some cases he had noticed that in the meantime the crack in the street had grown.

Taniguchi started to re-visit certain cracks and document their process of growth. Different from Muybridge's famous movement series of the galloping horse (Muybridge 1985), which made visible what previously had been too quick for the human eye to observe, Taniguchi's *hecomi* series make visible what otherwise is too slow for the human perception. In the differences between the various sculptures the material movement becomes visible.

Lastly, another aspect of movement in Taniguchi's *hecomi* studies involves a surprising mechanical "twist." While Taniguchi's sculptures usually are two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional cracks with a specific depth-structure, Taniguchi found a way to give his sculptures a third dimension back by installing hinges and axes along which the finely chiseled figures can rotate. The objects obtain a new mobility by being able to fold and unfold, to collapse and expand. However, these mechanical movements function fundamentally different from the organic movement that produces the cracks. By combining these two movement logics, the artist raises awareness for the singular constellation that has produced the crack and the resulting sculpture. In addition, with the mechanical, almost prosthetic movements, Taniguchi's sculptures obtain a very playful quality that counterbalances the seriousness and heaviness the ruptures bring up. After all, through the topic of cracks and the aging of materials we become aware of a post- and even pre-human aspect, i.e. the fact, that cracks as such have been there long before human life became part of the assemblage that we call world, and quite surely will be there long after humans have been wiped out (or more likely have wiped themselves out) from the surface of this planet – in any case, unless they are filled or repaired, they will outlive the beholders of Taniguchi's *hecomi* studies.

In conclusion, cracks as latent movements in different materials have proven to be performative figures that emerge as part of complex configurations, in which various forces have an influence on their development. At the same time cracks, while fluctuating between material and immaterial, have an impact on their surroundings, produce effects, create realities, by making visible or palpable structures which usually are hidden. Taniguchi's work illuminates, how immaterial cracks, as latent movements in human and non-human assemblages, are turned into positive, palpable, mobile sculptures, through processes of walking, selecting, then tracing, folding and fitting. The artistic process does not simply represent external movements, but through its diverse steps becomes part of these transforming assemblages, inviting the visitors to enter and get a sense of larger, non-human rhythms and processes of growth and material transformation.

If ruptures become a "thing" in this process, it is not to be equated simply with Taniguchi's sculptures, but rather with the dynamic, transforming constellation of complex relations that may or may not involve plants, materials, man-made infrastructures, etc. Taken together, they could be considered as a dance of rela-

tions, a non- or not-only human dance of material and immaterial acts of becoming, a constant transforming of beings, thoughts and emotions. Through cracks, we could begin to look at dance and art differently, too, taking into account the various influences, forces and co-authorships of things-in-process, substances and materials as forms of becoming that are actively involved in shaping the artistic processes. Cracks, as transforming, unstable "things" that dance between the material and the immaterial, double and blur categorical boundaries: where and when the things begin and the dances end (and vice versa) again becomes an open question.

References

Alsen, Katharina Kim/Heinsohn, Nina (2014): Deutungspotenziale von Trennungsmetaphorik. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven, in: Katharina Kim Alsen/Nina Heinsohn (Eds.), *Bruch – Schnitt – Riss: Deutungspotenziale von Trennungsmetaphorik in den Wissenschaften und Künsten*, Berlin/Münster: LIT, pp. 1-38.

Barad, Karen (2003): Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter, in: *Signs*, vol. 28 no. 3, pp. 801-831. [online] http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/345321 [26 May 2017].

Bennett, Jane (2010): *Vibrant Matter. A political ecology of things*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Diekmann, Stefanie/Khurana, Thomas (2007): Latenz. Eine Einleitung, in: Stefanie Diekmann/Thomas Khurana (Eds.), *Latenz. 40 Annäherungen an einen Begriff*, Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, pp. 9-13.

Ingold, Tim (2008): *Lines: a brief History*, London: Routledge.

Latour, Bruno (1996): On actor-network theory. A few clarifications, in: *Soziale Welt*, vol. 47 no. 4, pp. 369-381. [online] https://www.jstor.org/stable/40878163 [15 February 2019].

Muybridge, Eadweard (1985): *Horses and Other Animals in Motion. 45 Classic Photographic Sequences*, New York, NY: Dover.