

Everything I had been firmly convinced of, everything I had relied on, was blown away by the wind. I felt that I understood something. Without thinking about it, words came out of my mouth: »There is nothing at all in this world...« I felt that I understood nothing.
(Editor's note: To understand nothing in this sense means to recognize the inadequacy of intellectual knowledge.)

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As Far as I Don't Know Aesthetic experience as diffraction apparatus

Traces of the aesthetic

I walked through a group exhibition, registering the individual works without any aesthetic play taking place. The works did not spark my imagination to go beyond the sensory impressions, until I saw a work – »El agua en la ciudad« (2004) by Mexican artist Teresa Margolles – that made an impact on me even from a distance. On a screen hung in the room was a grayscale video, whose center was filled with a corpse lying in state. While this alone was not the crucial point, the decisive factor was the rising steam created by the hot water used to clean the body. This was done by a person standing behind the table with the help of a hose, protected by an apron, with their head out of the frame. What irritated me was that as the body lay there being hosed down with hot water, it looked so alive to me. In my imagination, the person lying there should have immediately jumped up in pain, but he didn't move. Of course, the reason for this was clear to me and could have calmed me down, but the images kept creating the impression of a body that would wake up at any moment and jump up screaming. By contrast, the apron and the casualness with which the person held the hose gave the impression that it was not a human body at all, but could just as easily be a slaughtered animal or a car being washed.

1 Masanobu Fukuoka, *Der Große Weg hat kein Tor* (1975; repr., Darmstadt: pala-verlag, 2021), 33 f. *All quotations, apart from those by Karen Barad, Giorgio Agamben and Neo Rauch have been translated by the author.

Part of the installation is a bench made out of concrete for the viewer (»Banco«, 2004). The concrete was made with the water used to clean the corpse. The bench on which the viewer sits actually contains traces of the dead body, which are now inseparable from the concrete. The bench on which I sit bears traces of past life and I think about how much life and death our civilization is and will be built on. I also wonder what will happen to the organisms in the dead human body and whether it will be a breeding ground for new organisms while others lose their habitat. I am thinking of our treatment of water and the many pollutants that end up in it and are then reabsorbed by organisms (and ourselves). The materiality of the bench cannot affect me to this extent on its own. I have to know and believe the artist that the wash water has been worked into the bench.

Aesthetic thinking

The previous sections are a description of sensory impressions and their linguistic reflection. Christoph Menke describes these two phases as “aesthetic watching” and “discursive reporting.”² Theory is “the exposure to watching and the return and reporting on this watching.” “Theory is divided in itself – into aesthetic watching and discursive reporting or articulation.”³ Aesthetic watching is linked to pathos – “suffering” or “being touched”⁴ – from which the watcher emerges through the process of reporting. In the experience of the exhibition visit described at the beginning, the “aesthetic watching” of »El agua en la ciudad« evoked a feeling of being touched, a resonance in me, and ultimately moved me to report on it, first to myself, and now here. By stepping out of aesthetic watching and into reflection, subjectivity is constituted:

There is subjectivity only in the break with the aesthetic state. If theory – in the second step – is the going beyond aesthetic watching, which it was – in the first step – then theory is therefore the condition of subjectivity. The theoretical break with aesthetic watching is the act of the subject’s self-constitution. Every subject is theoretical: it was a theatres, an aesthetic spectator who has placed himself out of this state by beginning to speak about it.⁵

2 Christoph Menke, *Die Kraft der Kunst* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013), 122.

3 Ibid. 123.

4 Ibid. 120, 126.

5 Ibid. 126.

»El agua en la ciudad« is the only work from the exhibition that I still remember today and that can still evoke aesthetic thinking in me. By describing the work now, years later, it still (or again) produces an effect on me and I can create new perspectives together with it without having to have it in front of my eyes. Now that it seems to be becoming the norm that human lives are brutally extinguished every day all over the world, in the image of the corpse being washed (presumably impassively) by another human being I see a luxury that many people are denied.

If aesthetic experiences are measured by their effect, many things are probably not aesthetic things in this strict sense for the respective subject. Only a few produce strong effects that trigger aesthetic thinking. However, these are not the same things for everyone, so that these also have their right to exist, which leave no traces in myself.

Intra-actions [relational ontology]

The fact that works of art can produce different effects in people and lead to very different descriptions of their experience is essentially facilitated by their relational and negative ontology (which will be discussed again later). Relational ontology has been present in art in the form of the *open* work since the mid-20th century at the latest, especially from the 1960s onwards. Open works of art replaced the concept of *closed* works in the sense of the »aesthetics of truth«. ⁶ They are open in terms of their physical object boundaries and their boundaries to non-art, and they are also characterized by a fundamental openness of meaning or indeterminacy towards interpreting subjects. This also meant an emancipation from the belief that (aesthetic) properties lie in the things themselves, which make them works of art independent of interpreting subjects. On the other hand, things only attain their aesthetic existence in the constitutive act *with* the subject. Rüdiger Bubner summarizes this under the term »aesthetic experience«. ⁷

⁶ According to Rüdiger Bubner, an aesthetic that assumes a truth placed in the work presupposes "the ontological location of the occurrence of truth outside of a theoretical context of thought." "An objective condition appears as a work, which has an independent existence beyond theory and reflection [...]." Rüdiger Bubner, "Über einige Bedingungen gegenwärtiger Ästhetik," in *Ästhetische Erfahrung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 32.

⁷ Bubner, "Über einige Bedingungen gegenwärtiger Ästhetik."

In no picture can you simply see what the viewer sees in it, in no poem can you definitely read what one reads in it, and in no piece of music is it enough to listen carefully to hear what is expressed in the aesthetic experience. [...] The aesthetic experience sees something that it cannot pin down and that is therefore always there.⁸

Parallels can be drawn between the characteristics of aesthetic experiences presented thus far and the framework of agential realism formulated by Karen Barad.⁹ This attempts to provide a comprehensive explanatory model for the analysis of reality, which can be applied in various disciplines. For example, it is negotiated as a model for human-machine “intra-actions” in HCI research¹⁰ or applied in media theory.¹¹ In addition to the parallels with aesthetic experience, differences are also highlighted that represent an extension of agential realism.

Similar to art, agential realism is also based on a relational ontology: “relational ontology [...] is at the core of agential realism.”¹² Two central concepts of this relational ontology are that 1) things (including humans) have no inherent properties and 2) things (including humans) have no clear boundaries. On the contrary, properties and boundaries emerge in “intra-actions” of agencies. »Agency« refers to the act of shaping reality, or – in the framework of agential realism – the production of reality. Barad defines »intra-action« as follows:

The neologism »intra-action« signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual »interaction«, which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action.¹³

One of the phenomena (»phenomena« emerge through intra-actions of agencies) analyzed in more detail by Barad is the ultrasound examination of an unborn child, in which interlocking and reality-configuring agencies emerge. To touch upon some aspects in brief: the examination assigns a gender to the fetus, which can lead

8 Ibid. 43.

9 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007).

10 Christopher Frauenberger, “Entanglement HCI The Next Wave?,” *ACM Trans. Comput.-Hum. Interact.* 27, no. 1 (November 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1145/3364998>.

11 Exemplary Olga Moskatova, “Apparate des Sichtbaren. Neomaterialistische Zugänge zur Agentialität der Bilder,” in *Agency Postdigital. Verteilte Handlungsmächte in Medienwissenschaftlichen Forschungsfeldern*, ed. Berenike Jung, Klaus Sachs-Hombach, and Lukas R.A. Wilde (Köln: Halem, 2021), 145–77.

12 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 93.

13 Ibid. 33.

to abortion due to different agencies such as the wishes of the mother or other people, social pressure, etc. On the other hand, the fetus can be assigned rights (agencies) and thus turn the mother from subject to object. However, the ultra-sound device is not objective and therefore does not always lead to the same results, but instead it is dependent on human operators and their interpretations as well as generally the setup in which it is used. Nevertheless, the resulting images are treated by us like photographs.¹⁴ According to the relational ontology of agential realism, agency is not an attribute that can be possessed, but rather: “[A]gency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has. [...] Agency is »doing« or »being« in its intra-activity.”¹⁵

Using Barad’s terms, aesthetic experience can be described as an entanglement that is created by the intra-action of – among other things – subject and object, whereby these in turn only emerge in this entanglement. Subject and object are therefore not independent, separable things, but are continuously constituted through intra-actions. It is therefore not *I* who interprets the (aesthetic) object, but rather an entanglement is realized in which many – above all socio-cultural – agencies participate. The object is not aesthetic per se. Whether something is aesthetic or not does not exist in itself, but rather it becomes aesthetic at the moment of aesthetic experience through the intra-action with the subject. The subject-object separation – and the hierarchies associated with it – is not determined and fixed from the outset, but is suspended in the entanglement of interacting agencies. Juliane Rebentisch formulates this with Bubner as follows:

*Aesthetic experience does not, as the concept of experience might initially suggest, reside solely in the subject. It takes place between subject and object, and in a way that the former can never fully control. Not only the object, but also the subject of aesthetic experience is aesthetic only through and as its becoming-aesthetic. Both the subject and the object of aesthetic experience must be conceived in terms of the aesthetic experience that constitutes them and can therefore only be adequately understood in relation to one another.*¹⁶

14 Barad, chap. 5. This comparison is certainly no longer as strong as when Barad formulated it. Due to the increasing digital image processing (already in the process of capturing) and the increasing amount of generated image content (and the agencies associated with both), the comparison could also be reversed: photographs are becoming increasingly like ultrasound recordings.

15 Ibid. 178.

16 Juliane Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst. Zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2013), 51.

Apparatus: Matter and meaning

Agential realism is based on the epistemology formulated by physicist Niels Bohr for the interpretation of quantum physics. His reason for doing so was that the prevailing epistemology in Western science still corresponded to classical Newtonian physics and was therefore incompatible with quantum physics.¹⁷ Put briefly, Bohr's epistemology is that through the instruments that we develop, we first define what can in principle be known about a thing. Through the measurements that are then actually carried out, properties are attributed to the thing within this delimited scope by means of language. What is said about a thing is therefore not inherent and objective in it, but rather dependent on instruments of knowledge production.¹⁸ Barad adopts this epistemology and supplements it with an ontology (which – in her view – is only implicitly present in Bohr's writings) and a resulting ethics.¹⁹

According to agential realism, the question of place, time and in general measurable or assignable properties does not *reflect* inherent properties of the objects, but rather these *properties emerge* depending on and in the respective frame of reference – the »apparatus« – with and in which the measurement or attribution is made.²⁰ *My* height or my age are not inherent properties, but are defined by external scales and measuring devices, as well as other socio-cultural factors that are part of the apparatus. Attributions such as »young« or »old« are primarily evidence of a meritocracy shaped by capitalism (which thus performs various agencies) and its underlying ontology²¹ and thus correspond less to physical, material

17 Barad describes what – in Bohr's view – would be necessary for adherence to Newtonian physics: "In other words, the assumptions entail a belief in representationalism (the independently determinate existence of words and things), the metaphysics of individualism (that the world is composed of individual entities with individually determinate boundaries and properties), and the intrinsic separability of knower and known (that measurements reveal the preexisting values of the properties of independently existing objects as separate from the measuring agencies)." Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 195.

18 *Ibid.*, 19–21.

19 From the author's perspective, ethics remains strongly underexposed, which is why the focus of this text is on ontology and epistemology. For a critique of Barad's remarks on ethics, see Katharina Hoppe and Thomas Lenke, "Die Macht der Materie. Grundlagen und Grenzen des agentiellen Realismus von Karen Barad." *Soziale Welt* 66, no. 3 (2015): 261–80, <https://doi.org/10.5771/0038-6073-2015-3-261>.

20 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 138 f. with reference to Bohr's »epistemological framework«.

21 Central dominant elements of the current structuring of the world are the drawing of boundaries and dualistic thinking. As a few examples: we see ourselves as clearly definable individuals with nameable properties (which exclude other properties); ascribe singular authorship to ourselves (as this article also appears under my name and yet would be a completely different one without the criticism and suggestions of Tobias Bieseke, Christian Heck, Leonie Hunter, Paul Kaletsch, Steffen Mitschelen, Christian Rust, Johanne Schröder, Georg Trogemann, Natalie Weinmann); dissect becoming through instruments such as time and calendars; and quantify and classify phenomena and judge primarily according to the dualistic principle (good or bad, win or lose, true or false, culture or nature, human or non-human, etc.).

reality. Measurements and attributions only become meaningful in a frame of reference with which they are defined interactively in “material-discursive boundary-making practices.”²² Foucault – to whom Barad refers here and for whose thinking the concept of the apparatus [»dispositif«] is central according to Giorgio Agamben – describes the term as follows:

*What I'm trying to single out with this term is, first and foremost, a thoroughly heterogeneous set consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the network that can be established between these elements...*²³

Apparatuses can be constructed, although this construction only defines a controllable and tangible part rather than the entire apparatus, as this cannot be fully delimited. Barad explains this at the beginning with reference to setups for physical experiments (however, the term apparatus as well as the framework of agential realism are not limited to the natural sciences or measuring instruments). An obvious example of the arbitrary but also fleeting nature of an apparatus and thus of unplanned agency occurred in the experiments carried out in 1922 by the physicists Otto Stern and Walther Gerlach to demonstrate »space quantization«. After Gerlach had constructed the apparatus based on Stern's idea in iterative runs (the difference between the simplicity of the idea and its time-consuming material realization was great) and they carried out experiments, they initially regarded the attempt as a failure. A beam of silver atoms should have left a trace at specific points on a flange, but Gerlach could not see any traces and passed the flange on to Stern. He looked at the flange up close and slowly traces appeared. Stern consumed a considerable number of cigars, but due to his low income²⁴ he could only afford cheap ones that contained a high proportion of sulfur, which passed into his breath

22 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 93, 170.

23 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. C. Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 194–96. Quoted by Giorgio Agamben, “What Is an Apparatus?,” in *What Is an Apparatus and Other Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 2.

24 It is well known that it is not only income that is decisive, but even more so the existing or non-existing capital in all its forms and agencies. For example, Pierre Bourdieu distinguishes between economic capital (material possessions), cultural capital (education) and social capital (network). Aladin El-Mafaalani, *Mythos Bildung. Die ungerechte Gesellschaft, ihr Bildungssystem und seine Zukunft* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2022), 26 f.

and transformed the silver on the flange into silver sulfide, which became visible.²⁵ Ultimately, his specific cigars proved to be a necessary component of the apparatus:

*The reproducibility of the experiment depends on the cigar's presence. Not any old cigar will do: the high sulfur content of a cheap cigar is crucial. Class, nationalism, gender, and the politics of nationalism, among other variables, are all part of this apparatus (which is not to say that all relevant factors figure in the same way or with the same weight).*²⁶

These are “difference[s] that make a difference.”²⁷ In the 1960s, Joseph Kosuth developed a perspective on conceptual art according to which “the sensual medium is irrelevant as a condition of art.” It was only about the content of the idea, the concept, the concept of art in general, etc., whereas the material realization was no longer relevant.²⁸ Kosuth wanted to provide (material) proof of this concept of art himself with his work »Art as Idea as Idea«, comprising prints of enlarged dictionary entries on abstract terms such as »definition«, »art«, »meaning« or »chair«. However, it was precisely their enlargement that produced material peculiarities in the typeface and the carrier medium, which distract from the abstract terms and can thus generate additional meanings.²⁹ Artifacts of art exemplify the ontological and epistemological view that meanings are not firmly anchored in things but are produced in discourse. With different interpreting/intra-acting subjects/objects, different entanglements emerge, i.e. including different discursive practices and thus different meanings. A variety of – also material – agencies are integrated into an aesthetic experience: the historicity (of art), the socio-cultural character of the interpreting subject, the current mood, spontaneous interests, the situation in which the aesthetic experience takes place, and much more. Aesthetic experiences extend beyond mere terminological thinking and can therefore be particularly influential. For example, when I talk about *non-human animals*, this is intended to break down

25 Barad criticizes the fact that the primacy of the visual over other senses has a major influence on epistemology. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 86. The same applies to art, which (still) places a strong focus on viewing objects from a distance. Touching, breathing on, etc. is rarely welcomed. Of course, this is related to the fact that this leads to actual material changes, such as photographing with a flash. For the most part, works of art should rather be excluded from material changes (i.e. remain closed to a certain extent).

26 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 165.

27 *Ibid.* 72.

28 Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst. Zur Einführung*, 135-37.

29 *Ibid.* 141.

the anthropocentric hierarchy so that I see myself as a human animal (or a pet).³⁰ Nonetheless, even if I *think* this many times, it may have less of an effect on my view of myself and the world than if I were to have just one aesthetic experience.

With his idea of conceptual art, Kosuth underestimated both the agency of the material (typeface, irregularities in the lettering, the structure of the paper and the irregularities it contains, the medium of his work, artifacts resulting from the enlargement, the way it is hung, etc.) and that of the subject in relation to the material. In contrast to Kosuth, Bohr holds that theoretical concepts cannot be pure abstractions but rather emerge from material configurations. Thus, as Bohr stated when determining the position and (or) momentum of a particle in quantum physics, it only makes sense to speak of the concept »position« of an object in relation to an apparatus within which this specific position can be established as a relation.³¹ Nevertheless, it is precisely these alphanumeric abstractions of attributions that make them appear as real inherent properties in everyday life. We are not as big as this specific floor lamp, but have the size of an abstract number in conjunction with an abstract unit. There are pragmatic reasons for this: our world – which is largely organized by formal systems (“boundary-making practices”) – would not function at all otherwise, although this does not mean that it has to be the way it is today.

Diffraction apparatus: Matter and meaning

*[D]iffraction apparatuses measure the effects of difference, even more profoundly they highlight, exhibit, and make evident the entangled structure of the changing and contingent ontology of the world, including the ontology of knowing. In fact, diffraction not only brings the reality of entanglements to light, it is itself an entangled phenomenon.*³²

In physics, diffraction refers to the superposition/interference of waves, i.e. their superposition or extinction. One of the examples presented by Barad describes (water) waves that move straight towards a wall in which there are two passages. As a result, the waves divide and create new – different – waves of superposition and extinction behind the wall. Referring to

30 This is more of a pun in German language: “Menschliches Tier (oder Haustier),” meaning human animal or animal living in a house.

31 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 139.

32 *Ibid.* 73.

Donna Haraway,³³ Barad presents »diffraction« as a methodological contrast to reflection: “both are optical phenomena, but whereas the metaphor of reflection reflects the themes of mirroring and sameness, diffraction is marked by patterns of difference.”³⁴ According to Barad, reflection goes back to representationalism, i.e. the idea that representations reflect reality and that this practice has no influence on the things themselves.³⁵ While reflection (as a physical phenomenon) reproduces an object more or less accurately and does not change it, diffraction leads to a change in the object or phenomenon.³⁶ Similarly, the discursive method of diffraction focuses on differences in the form of particularities instead of similarities: “diffractions are attuned to differences – differences that our knowledge-making practices make and the effects they have on the world.”³⁷ Diffraction apparatuses are “analytical instruments” that have to be “tuned” to the details of the phenomenon under investigation, but they also change it by generating “patterns of diffraction.” Since they arise within the phenomenon itself and do not exist outside and detached from it, they are sometimes an instrument and sometimes an object of investigation. Nevertheless, they can gradually help us to investigate phenomena and generate knowledge about them.³⁸

In the following, the thesis is put forward that works of art aim to be diffraction apparatuses. Even if the term »reflection« is often used in the context of the production and reception of art, the term »diffraction« much more clearly captures the essence. According to Ursula Brandstätter: “Aesthetic experience is often characterized as an experience of difference [...]. An essential function of art is therefore to break up traditional ways of perceiving and thinking. The ordinary is called into question, the familiar is made strange, irritations are intended to lead to a restructuring of perception and thought.”³⁹ In art, we are confronted with sensually perceptible phenomena that run counter to our everyday experience and perception and thus bring them to our attention. The point of contemporary art is “to insert

33 Donna Haraway: “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others.” In *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, 295–337. New York: Routledge, 1992.

34 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 71.

35 *Ibid.* 86.

36 *Ibid.* 81.

37 *Ibid.* 72.

38 *Ibid.* 73.

39 Ursula Brandstätter, “Ästhetische Erfahrung,” *Kulturelle Bildung Online*, 2013, <https://www.kubi-online.de/artikel/aesthetische-erfahrung>

certain discontinuities into the continuum of chronological time. To be at the cutting edge of time, to be con-temporal, means, as Giorgio Agamben puts it, to divide time, to insert caesuras that make it legible in the first place.”⁴⁰ Brandstätter states: “When we engage with aesthetic phenomena, we learn to deal with plurality, heterogeneity, differences and contradictions.”⁴¹ Since aesthetic experience leads to the “intertwining of self-reference and world-reference,”⁴² not only is there an experience of difference from the world, but also from the experiencing and self-constituting subject itself. Christoph Menke formulates this following his criticism of Neo Rauch’s painting *Amt*, which leads to the judgment that it is not an aesthetic object:

It is not an aesthetic object at all, because to be »aesthetic« means not to be an object, not to be an object for a recognizing and judging subject; but to be the opposite, indeed the opposite of the subject, capable of provoking the subject’s reluctance to judge; an opposite, in other words, that eludes its constitution as an object just as much as it undermines the subject’s self-constitution in the aesthetic play. Rauch’s picture is bad because it does not have the power to make the judging subject unbearable to itself. What is aesthetically bad is the mere object – that in which the subject, in negative or positive judgment, can reflect itself. [...] The aesthetically bad is the object of the judgment of good or bad, which, as a mere object, does not have the power to make the subject react against itself. The aesthetically bad leaves the subject in agreement with itself.⁴³

The relationship between object and subject is crucial. If an aesthetic object merely enables the reflection of one’s own subjectivity, it is not an aesthetic object at all. On the other hand, an aesthetic object eludes subjective access and at the same time calls into question the constitution of the subject that it evokes. In aesthetic experience, one thing does not follow on from another in a strictly causal manner, whereby the subject would experience itself in its capability,⁴⁴ and there are leaps and changes of direction. There is no progress in the sense of logical reasoning that leads us to the one correct meaning. On the contrary, we can assign different – even contradictory – meanings to the object (without these being nested in the object itself). Within art, we realize that we do not arrive at a final interpretation (if it is good art), but that we could endlessly continue to play with the production of meanings in intra-action with the object.

40 Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst. Zur Einführung*, 13.

41 Brandstätter, “Ästhetische Erfahrung.”

42 Ibid.

43 Menke, *Die Kraft der Kunst*, 78.

44 “To have capability means to be a subject; to be a subject means to be able to do something. [...] Every capability is the capability of repeating a general.” In this, capability is social practice. If art is about the repetition of the general, art is social (trained) practice. Menke, *Die Kraft der Kunst*, 13.

Aesthetic apparatus [negative ontology]

*Unlike the object of utility, however flexible it may be, the modern work of art is, in Adorno's formulation, determined through and through by its »enigmatic character«; it is determined by the fact that it eludes any clear definition and thus also any purpose. Works of art are things, writes Adorno, »of which we do not know what they are«.*⁴⁵

In the opening quotation of the previous section, Barad speaks of the “ontology of the world, including the ontology of knowing” that becomes visible and negotiable through diffraction apparatuses. Not included is the ontology of non-knowing. In the previous section, (open) works of art were presented as diffraction apparatuses.⁴⁶ In the following, the thesis is further sharpened: works of art are not only diffraction apparatuses, but a special form that comprises the production of phenomena of non-knowing, things of which we do not know what they are. This special form – which agential realism lacks – is called aesthetic apparatus in the context of this text.

On a positive note, *the unknown* drives research and development. However, the aim is to resolve the unknown and the unknowable or circumvent them through the construction and maintenance of apparatuses. These not only define what is accepted as meaningful, but also what must be excluded.⁴⁷ “[A]pparatuses are boundary-making practices.”⁴⁸ In view of the discursive constraints under which our knowledge is produced, we could understand these boundary-making practices as a form of dealing with the unknown, through exclusion. “Discourse is not what is said; it is that which constrains and enables what can be said. Discursive practices define what counts as meaningful statements.”⁴⁹ According to Barad, thinking of discourse as something merely language-based follows the assumptions of representationalism. On the other hand, it is a material practice. Through the material configuration of reality, meaning is created and reinforced, as well as weakened, excluded and prevented. Discursive practices and knowledge production are not reserved for humans alone.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Barad is primarily concerned with a modified scientific production of knowledge that

45 Rebentisch, *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst. Zur Einführung*, 34.

46 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, 73

47 Barad in recourse to Foucault. Barad, 63.

48 Ibid. 148.

49 Ibid. 146.

50 Ibid. 375, 379.

does justice to physical-material reality. In contrast to art, she is not concerned with the *production of the unknown*.

Agential realism represents a counter-position to common ontology and epistemology. These are presented by Barad as too reductive (originally in relation to the interpretation of quantum physics, but then also explicitly in relation to attributions such as race and gender) and too anthropocentric (e.g. in the hierarchical distinction between culture/nature, human/non-human). In view of the growing global problems in the present world, it is also plausible to see these problems as a consequence of our inaccurate ontological-epistemological view of the world, which therefore requires a reorientation. Here, aesthetic experiences can serve as a practice field.⁵¹ This is due to their concrete realization in sensually perceptible phenomena and their creation of diffraction apparatuses. Rüdiger Bubner describes the structure of aesthetic experience with Kant's reflective judgment, which is contrasted with the determining judgment. In the logical process of reasoning, the determining judgment takes action and attempts to subsume a particular under a general. This is contrasted with the reflective power of judgment, which finds a particular that cannot be subsumed under a general concept.⁵² In aesthetic experience, it becomes clear that language as a form of representation is not identical with things and that these and their meanings cannot be fully grasped linguistically (being incommensurable). The back and forth between aesthetic watching and conceptual grasping, between "the structure of incomprehensibility" and the "expectation of understanding"⁵³ is already an open-ended diffractive process. "Judgment becomes confused and thus judgment becomes aware of its own function. It moves back and forth between an indeterminable particular and an unavailable general, and in this floating, the mediating movement is aesthetically

51 Here, it is important not to equate aesthetic experience with art. Problems *outside* of art can also be found *within* art; for example, in the form of exaggerated artist subjects that run counter to the ontology of aesthetic experience and agential realism. The »outside« in the above sentence does not withstand the ontology of agential realism. Nevertheless, this linguistic construct is used here in its conventionality with reference to this conventionality. In general, it is a difficult undertaking to formulate linguistically correct in the sense of agential realism, as our language and the associated conventions have adapted interactively with the dominant ontology, at least in the so-called West. This is comparable to the difficulty of putting the teachings of Zen Buddhism into words: "When I give a lecture, the audience and I find ourselves in a slightly paradoxical situation. With words and sentences that often become abstractions, I try to explain something that cannot be explained, while the audience tries to hear something that cannot be heard." Jakusho Kwong, *Kein Anfang kein Ende. Die Essenz des Zen* (München: Goldmann Verlag, 2004), 177.

52 Bubner, "Über einige Bedingungen gegenwärtiger Ästhetik," 36.

53 Ibid. 41.

activated.”⁵⁴ It becomes palpable that attributions of meanings are not conclusive, but take place in an open process that is terminated at some point without coming to an end.⁵⁵

Agential realism is committed to posthumanism but remains surprisingly anthropocentric. Ultimately – including in all of Barad’s examples – the focus is on gaining knowledge from a human (scientific) perspective. Her epistemology is closely linked to the (controlling) subject, which exercises power through agency. Of course, it becomes very clear how distributed this agency is and how it emerges in temporary configurations, as well as the notion that agency can be lost, whereby a subject can become an object (see the phenomenon of ultrasound examination). Nevertheless – and particularly strikingly regarding her critique of representationalism – agential realism is strongly on the side of conceptual knowledge production through subjective capability. On the other hand, aesthetic objects block subjective control in aesthetic experiences and allow us to experience the limitations of our knowledge and understanding. In this respect, works of art – “calculated alienation”⁵⁶ – are diffraction apparatuses par excellence. Consequently, agential realism must be supplemented by the discursive practice of *producing the unknown*, that which we do not (cannot) know what it is.

54 Ibid. 36.

55 For many artists, the production of the artifact is also an open-ended process that must be artificially interrupted (by agencies). See Neo Rauch’s statement about the final state of his paintings: “It is not finished. And it will never be finished. I’ll stop working on it at some point, it’ll be taken out of my hands, and then it’ll be over. [...] So it just has to remain the way it is when the haulage men come to take it away.” Neo Rauch. A German Painter, Documentary, 2008, sec. 38:30-39:30.

56 Bubner, “Über einige Bedingungen gegenwärtiger Ästhetik,” 45.



