Exploring Materiality and Connectivity in Anthropology and Beyond

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10 Intervention

What remains: the things that fall to the side of everyday life

Marc Higgin

Water collected from a puddle on King Street, one of the major roads running through Aberdeen, Scotland, connecting the fishing ports and oil refineries to the north with the harbour and cities to the south. Water carried halfway across Europe to another city, decanted into a humidifier and placed in the corner of the break-out room of a symposium convened around the theme of materiality and connectivity in anthropological research. Next to the humidifier is a label identifying the source to those curious enough to wander over.

Aberdeen. Day and night, lorries, buses and cars pass, containers ferrying their payloads of people, equipment, goods, food, animals to slaughter, fish to market, waste to treatment and landfill. King Street’s smooth, surfaced ground is a vital part of the circulatory system through which the economy of north-east Scotland has grown. However, the focus here is not on the infrastructure of the road itself. Nor is it on the modes of materiality and connectivity of the things travelling along it, things accounted for and given value through exchange, the ‘goods’ that fill everyday life. Instead, my interest is with the externalities, with the things that fall to the side and make up the atmosphere of King Street as a particular place: the noise of the traffic, the air laden with smells, soot and dust, the play of shadows

Figure 10.1  Close-up of humidifier stocked with water collected from a puddle on King Street, Aberdeen, in late January 2017. Installation by Marc Higgin, Symposium Connecting Materialities/Material Connectivities, Munich 2017, LMU Center for Advanced Studies. Photo by Vivien Ahrens.

Figure 10.2  King Street, at night after the rush hour. Photo by the author.
from passing headlights, the brightly lit faces staring out from buses, the flotsam and jetsam that accumulate in its gutters and drains.

Munich. Turned to vapour, the water fills the room while people eat and speak. Nearly invisible, this intervention is less representation than representation of the street on which I have lived with my family for the last two years. Its aim was not to paint a picture of King Street in the realist tradition, nor to illustrate a ‘study of’ lives lived along its length (Ingold 2008, 82). Instead – in the experimental spirit of juxtaposing things, stories and ideas developed over the course of the mat–con workshops – the remains of one place directly intervene, interpose themselves, in another. Though scarcely noticed, the vapour is nevertheless breathed in by all those in the room, with its cargo of particles gleaned from car tyres and engine exhausts, with its teeming microbial life fed by dropped cigarette butts and seagull shit, all absorbed and metabolised alongside the food and conversation. This intervention does something and, as I will elaborate, it is exactly the inconspicuousness of this doing that makes it interesting to this collection’s attention to materiality and connectivity within anthropological research.

The work is a homage to the artist Teresa Margolles, in particular her work ‘Air/Aire’, an installation into which I inadvertently stumbled on a visit, in 2008, to the ‘Emotional Systems’ exhibition at the Palazzo Strozzina in Florence, Italy. I pushed through a set of those heavy plastic curtains more at home in a butcher’s shop or slaughterhouse to find myself alone in a bare, white room. There was a slight and somewhat earthy quality to the air but nothing out of place in a basement not far from the river. Lacking any other place to land, my attention was drawn to a nondescript machine in the far corner. Wandering over, I read the small label that told me that the water in this humidifier had been used to wash the corpses of murder victims at the municipal morgue in Mexico City. My sense of the room flipped on its head, a visceral shock had me disgusted, disbeliefing, unwilling to breathe, laughing, fascinated and deeply saddened, all in quick succession.

The involuntary intimacy of the piece broke all the conventions of representational art, with its still lifes, nudes and landscapes that keep the world at a polite distance. But it also unsettled the detached distance of the pathologist, examining the bodies laid out on the slab along with the numbing litany of the news that has given up counting the victims of a war that has been going on for years. Absent of any hyperbole, the work quietly (re)presents death, murder, a war whose reasons spread far beyond Mexico, implicating us all. Avoiding the figurative, Margolles’s installation works through what François Lyotard (2011) called the ‘figural’, a disruptive force that works to interrupt established habits and structures in the realms
of both discourse and sense, forcing their transformation. The installation interposed itself between sensuous experience and thought, undermining the sure footing of both. It was this technology of re-presentation I wanted to borrow – both the involuntary intimacy it forced upon its ‘viewer’ and its means of making this intimacy evident – in order to leverage its visceral power to unsettle anthropological theorising around materiality and connectivity. Playing at the border between art and anthropology (Schneider and Wright 2010, 1–22), the intervention follows in the footsteps of Alfred Gell and his anthropological (re)definition of art as technology of entrapment (Gell 1996). At stake here is less a reading of the ‘complex intention-alities’ that Gell saw at work in the work of art than the dispositive that Gell appropriates from the Western art world, the ‘white cube’ framing the encounter with an artwork (see Higgin 2017). The intervention is a proposition in the shape of a puzzle, awaiting a viewer to make sense of it, ‘a trap or a snare that impedes passage’ (Gell 1996, 37), slowing down habitual ways of perceiving, feeling and thinking in order to open possibilities for doing these otherwise.

From objects to atmospheres

For Tim Ingold, the civil engineering that characterises the road system in the UK (and in much of the world) aims to

convert the ground into the kind of surface that theorists of modernity always thought it was – level, homogeneous, pre-existent and inert. It is to make the earth into a stage, platform, floor or baseboard, or, in a word, into an infrastructure, upon which the superstructure of the city can be erected.

(Ingold 2015, 45)

Modernity has its dream of frictionless matter and instant connectivity but, as Ingold goes on to argue, this hard-surfaced world still partakes in the weather, in the flux of beings, materials and forces from which every particular place is continually being made and remade. The puddle from which I filled a plastic bottle was not, in this sense, a discrete thing but a thinging, a kind of gathering (Ingold 2010, 5; see also Heidegger 1971, 164–72) carried by the rain blowing in from the North Sea, carrying together the heavy hydrocarbons of asphalt, the synthetic rubber, steel, waxes, oils, pigments and silicas of the tyres passing over its surface, the salt that the council liberally spreads during the winter months, the fallout from the
exhausts of countless combustion engines with its sulphur dioxide, carbon monoxide and dioxide, nitrogen oxide, ozone, chlorofluorocarbons, petrol, benzene, particulates, heavy metals, the remains of last year’s leaves, spit, the crumbs from a thrown-away crisp packet – a litany that only scratches the surface.

Spreading out to envelop the lunchtime chatter of a symposium, the intervention gestures towards a different mode of materiality and connectivity from those of the “‘middle-sized dry goods” which are supposed to populate the world of “common sense”’ (Latour 2012, 163): that familiar world of stable objects and artefacts that populate economic theories and accounts of the social. Since the inception of anthropology as a discipline, accounts from beyond the familiar horizons of Western material cultures have troubled the apparent ease with which people and things can be distanced one from the other. The recent, and much-needed, turn to ‘materiality’, to the innumerable things that surround us and through which we live our social lives – the houses we live in, the clothes we wear, the pictures we hang on our walls, the weapons we kill with, the cars we drive – has been driven by a recognition that the very physicality of bodies and stuff, so obviously important in everyday life, had been left behind as anthropologists read through them to their social function and cultural meaning.

It is this approach to materiality – as an attention to the sensible qualities of things and how these have been co-opted into human worlds – that I want to unsettle here. While this attention has, undoubtedly, allowed for a richer, more nuanced, unfolding of the mutually constitutive relationship between people and the material world within social scientific accounts (for example Miller 2008), my intervention in the ‘surrounding vital quality’ of place – what anthropologists have begun to take seriously as ‘atmosphere’ (see Schroer and Schmitt 2018) – aims to bring to momentary attention another, inadvertent and unaccounted, mode of ‘materiality’ and ‘connectivity’ that goes beyond the habitual mode of ‘object-thinking’ (Ingold, Chapter 1 in this volume; see also Higgin 2016).

**Mind the gap**

In Chapter 9 of this volume, Gillian Tan gives an account of how smoke is used within the Tibetan bsang ritual that tries to find a way out of the

**Figure 10.3** What remains: view of installation. Installation by Marc Higgin, Symposium Connecting Materialities/Material Connectivities, Munich 2017, LMU Center for Advanced Studies. Photo by Vivien Ahrens.

**Figure 10.4** Portrait of my son with line of toy cars, taken from King Street. Photo by the author.
conceptual framework, endemic to Western ways of thinking, that would define what smoke is – as a particular kind of a substance – in order to understand smoke as co-constituent of a ritual that establishes and maintains vital relationships between people, landscape and deities. Likewise, my intervention gestures beyond a framing of this puddle water-turned-surrounding vapour as substance, or collection of substances, towards what its multiplicity can do: what are their underlying forces and potentialities as material entities? What relationships is it busy establishing with the beings breathing it in?

In tentative analogy with the bsang ritual that Tan articulates, the intention was not to represent the tangible materiality and connectivity of already thrown things and relations but to make tangible this ‘infra’-materiality and -connectivity of our mostly overlooked immersion in a medium, in its weather. The act of reading the label calls attention to our breathing, suddenly unsure of itself, suspiciously sniffing a world beyond familiar grasp. Its aim is to provoke an awareness, however temporary and amorphous, of the involuntary, constitutive relationship with a (latent) commons of which our living, breathing bodies necessarily partake (Tsing 2015). Without the small label framing it as an intervention, the humidifier and vapour would have remained in the background, unnoticed. It is this lack of presence that interests me here. Negligible, neglected, this is materiality and connectivity – as the sensible world we pay attention to, care for and give value to – exhausted.

As a coming-together of substances that have fallen out of the familiar world of tarmac and tyres, pavements and pedestrians, this puddle water is fascinating and unsettling precisely because it lays bare the inherent movement and transformation of the world of which every object is but a passing realisation. What relations can these substances enter into? What chemical romances are they disposed to? These questions remain open in part because so little is known about the metabolic afterlife of the particulates of iron or zinc oxide released by the engines following each other on King Street, or any of the multitude of other compounds used in the making of all that is transported along its length that will eventually fall out of familiar form. Reciting a barely adequate litany of substances does little to mask the realisation that we have next to no sense, next to no idea, of what we are already undergoing in promiscuous relation with them.

While the turn to materiality in anthropology has gone beyond representation to take seriously the serially overlooked in Western academia – senses, emotions, bodies, practice – this much more generous approach to understanding human relations (with human and non-human beings,
with deities, with weather, with ...) does not exhaust people’s involvement with the world into which we have all been thrown, a world not wholly of anyone’s making and with which we relate in a multiplicity of ways, most of which escape us. This is not to invoke the well-rehearsed Enlightenment distinction between primary and secondary qualities of the world; the first refers to measurable properties of objects that are independent of any observer, the second to the appearance of objects as they appear to an observer. This dichotomy resurfaces in a concept of materiality characterised above; to quote from the archaeologist Chris Tilley,

there is on the one hand a processual world of stones which takes place oblivious to the actions, thoughts and social and political relations of humans. Here we are dealing with ‘brute’ materials and their properties. On the other hand there is the processual significance stones have in relation to persons and sociopolitical relations.

(Tilley 2007, 17)

The concept of materiality is complicit in a worldview that separates out a human social sphere – its *anthropology* – divorced from the world within which it grows and takes shape, and into which it ultimately falls back. What this dichotomy between subjective appearance and objective reality misses is the centrality of practice to all knowledge-traditions: the *making sensible* of the world through the practical curiosity of people, following an ‘instinctive faith’ that there is more to nature than first meets the eye (Stengers 2011, 105). As Bruno Latour argues, the sciences are defined by their tradition of experimentation, understood as the work of a body ‘learning to be affected by hitherto unregistrable differences through the mediation of an artificially created set-up’ (Latour 2004, 209). Rather than adjudicate between Nature, as the *really real*, and Culture, as the *apparently real*, these empirical sciences serve to multiply the number of things abroad in the world.

My point is that our collective attention has been elsewhere. We know so little about the substances brought together in this puddle water, so little about their metabolic lives as they are breathed in by the participants in the symposium because they have not been made to matter. They are an externality to how we collectively organise, care for and give value to our shared socio-material environments. The vast majority of research and development is so focused on organising the world and making it available for our use (this is Heidegger’s definition of technology in his essay ‘The question concerning technology’ (1977)) that we, collectively, pay next to no attention to what happens when
these useful things fall out of use. The tragedy of the synthetic material culture that Europe, in the main, has been responsible for exporting to the rest of the world is that, like a plastic bottle bobbing in the ocean, most of its ‘social’ life (after its ‘consumption’) plays out of sight, out of mind. The ‘unknown unknowns’ (to use Donald Rumsfeld’s inimitable terminology) of the metabolic life of materials remain simply unimportant to the ‘projects’ by which we come to know, and refashion, the material world in our own idealised image. The mode of materiality and connectivity gestured to in this intervention is a proposition that remains an open question, requiring ongoing attention and care, integral to what the editors understand by curation of socio-material environments. In its small way, this intervention joins in with Anna Tsing’s plea for a resurgence in the ‘arts of noticing’ (2015) that might render visible the ‘latent commons’ in which we are entangled, for good or for ill, with the world in all the plurality of its becoming, and activate them as sites of common interest.

Notes

1. While referring specifically to Ingold’s distinction between ethnography and anthropology, I am drawing on the much wider critical reflection within the discipline that undermines any claim to represent the lives of others in a straightforward, realist sense.
2. Margolles trained as a forensic pathologist and used to work for SEMEFO, the Mexican Coroner’s Office.

References


