

## Diffractions, Issue 9: Beyond the Object – Immaterial Pasts, Immaterial Futures

Research Center for Communication and Culture (CECC) Universidade Católica  
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### DIFFRACTIONS

Call for papers | Diffractions, Issue 9.

Beyond the Object: Immaterial Pasts, Immaterial Futures.

The next issue of Diffractions explores immateriality in artistic and cultural practices as a form of both expression and resistance. For centuries, the histories of artistic practices (as well as historiographies and historicities) have been anchored to materiality and the production of objects. As Michel Claura argues, “[t]he history of art is the history of the technique of art” (1969, 83). Indeed, curatorship as we know it today initially developed around objects and their need of care.

However, artists have constantly been questioning and deconstructing the need to produce objects, shifting the focus from physical artworks to their assigned concepts and intentions. These practices include performances, happenings, participatory and socially engaged artistic movements, and Nicolas Bourriaud (2002)’s relational aesthetics in one of the best-known examples. While artistic production has challenged the dogmatic authority of materiality and its exhibition and conservation practices (from private collections to national archives, among many others), cultural institutions and political bodies (and the so-called Western ones in particular) have only recently started to value the immaterial artistic expressions of individuals and communities.

For instance, the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage only dates back to 2003, and is still today a source of discussion for its polarising nature and limitations (Van Damme and Jacobs 2002). A very discussed case is the 2010 inscription of the Mediterranean Diet in the 2003 UNESCO Convention, which comprises as geographically and culturally different cuisines as the Cypriot, Italian and Portuguese culinary traditions.

However, it has emerged that the description of the Mediterranean diet has turned out to be complex and almost impossible (Ferro-Luzzi and Sette 1989), while “[r]ecent investigations of the dietary patterns and health status of the countries surrounding the Mediterranean basin clearly indicate major differences among them in both dietary intake and health status” and therefore “the term “Mediterranean diet” is a misnomer” (Simopoulos 2001, 3065). To fit the limits of the Convention, the inscribed object ended up being broad and even generic, as a result of the absence of a specific domain of culinary heritage and the significant territorial differences between the co-signatory countries.

Despite the western centric idea that Marcel Duchamp's conceptual turn caused an unprecedented shift in the artworld by allowing intentional acts to be technically considered art, the presence of immaterial practices as both cultural artefacts and tools for the production of knowledge has long existed in multiple cultures over millennia. Described by Brandt as the art of "picking up an object and displaying it, or even of merely declaring the intention to do so" (2004, 210), Duchamp's ready-mades (but also Isamu Noguchi's practice of rock placement, for instance) have long and improperly been addressed as a first example of physical and technical abstraction. Not only has the dematerialization of art been explored in different periods and geographies as a way of criticising art systems and challenging institutional structures (Osborne 2018; Ramírez 1993; Stimson 1999), but certain cultures have rarely or even never resorted to physical media, favouring, for instance, orality over the use of writing.

On this subject, in her book *Immaterial Archives: An African Diaspora Poetics of Loss* comparative literature scholar Jenny Sharpe addresses "the paucity of documentary evidence concerning the lives of people who were immaterial to the archiving process, but not by treating contemporary art and literature as an alternative archive" (Sharpe 2020, 3). Here, she continues, immaterial "refers to the intangible quality of affects, dreams, spirits, and visions that art and literature introduce into material archives" and, in particular, "to the degraded status of African-derived knowledge, languages, and cultures within colonial archives, as well as the diminished status of the humanities in an information-based society today" (2020, 4). If these phenomena are made up of visions, affects, mythologies, dreams and even silence (and much more), Sharpe asks, are they something or nothing? Do they have substance even though they have a different relationship to traditional Western archival practices and written records?

The link between materiality and extractivist colonialism first and accumulative capitalism later is not new. As sociologist Rolando Vázquez writes, the objectification of the world is needed in order to conquer it (2020). This economic interest-based attitude towards materiality traces back to the enlightenment rational belief that the natural world subsists only as an instrument for human ambition. In their article "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter", Karen Barad challenges this anthropocentric separation arguing that "«[w]e» are not outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply located at particular places in the world; rather, we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity" (2003, 828). In fact, the idea that humans are outside nature is addressed by Anna Grear as a contributing factor to the "climate and environmental fallouts; the fundamentally colonial capitalist imperatives driving the continuing structural dominance of the fossil-fuel economy; extensive, and continuing, corporate enclosures in the Global South; and the pervasive and expanding commodification and technification of «nature»" (2020, 338). Within a context of fast-paced logic of industrial and cultural production (Bouteloup 2020) based on practices of human and non-human exploitation, how should we question the historically dominant focus on materiality in artistic and cultural practices today?

This issue of *Diffractions* wants to start a discussion about how multiple perspectives and fields of research and action have blurred the boundaries between binary conceptions such as human-nature, subject-object, and material-immaterial to acknowledge alternative narratives, existences, and temporalities (Bellacasa 2017; Krasny 2022; Vázquez 2020). These include, but are not limited to, posthumanist studies, decolonial and care practices, gender and feminist studies, artistic and activist actions, and many more. It intends to challenge materialist theories and reflect on the

importance of non-materials such as ideas, emotions, sensations, and questions of being and becoming – what Elizabeth Grosz coined as the “incorporeal” (2017) – on our ethical and political existences and on the relationships between humans and other living beings. In fact, we believe that new materialities and immaterialities are particularly significant in their attempts to question and eventually overcome anthropocentrism, but also in the celebration of listening practices and oral traditions through the recognition of knowledge as discursive, embodied, and affective across “more than human materialities and existences” (Bellacasa 2017, 221).

We look forward to receiving proposals for contributions addressing these or related questions in several different formats (research paper, creative essay, documentation of art-based research and practices, ...). Topics include but are not limited to:

- ☒ Immaterialities and new materialities in artistic and cultural practices;
- ☒ Alternative art histories, historiographies, and historicities;
- ☒ Documenting, archiving and collecting the immaterial;
- ☒ Curating the immaterial;
- ☒ Performativity and relationality in immateriality;
- ☒ Listening practices from the past, through the present, and towards the future: orality and transmission;
- ☒ Ancestral, virtual, hybrid: on non-physical bodies;
- ☒ Immateriality as decolonial and postcolonial praxis;
- ☒ Capitalism and commodification: immateriality as resistance;
- ☒ Dematerialization of artistic practices: the curatorial, research, dialogue, and knowledge production;
- ☒ Physicality and ephemerality: cultural spaces;
- ☒ Digital and virtual expressions;
- ☒ Immaterial existences: posthumanism and new materialism;
- ☒ Immateriality and alternative temporalities;
- ☒ Material and immaterial power dynamics.
- ☒ ...

Submissions and review process:

Abstracts will be received and reviewed by the Diffractions editorial board who will decide on the pertinence of proposals for the upcoming issue. After submission, we will get in touch with the authors of accepted abstracts in order to invite them to submit a full article. However, this does

not imply that these papers will be automatically published. Rather, they will go through a peer-review process that will determine whether papers are publishable with minor or major changes, or they do not fulfill the criteria for publication.

Please send abstracts of 150 to 250 words and 5-8 keywords as well as a short biography (100 words) by DECEMBER 15th, 2023 to [info.diffractions@gmail.com](mailto:info.diffractions@gmail.com) with the subject "Diffractions 9", followed by your last name.

The full papers should be submitted by MARCH 31st, 2024, through the journal's platform: <https://revistas.ucp.pt/index.php/diffractions/about/submissions>.

Every issue of Diffractions has a thematic focus but also contains a special section for non-thematic articles. If you are interested in submitting an article that is not related to the topic of this particular issue, please consult the general guidelines available at the Diffractions website at <https://revistas.ucp.pt/index.php/diffractions/about/submissions>. The submission and review process for non-thematic articles is the same as for the general thematic issue. All research areas of the humanities are welcome.

Guest Editors: Federico Rudari, Teresa Pinheiro

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