

PowerPoint presentation BLOCK_CHAIN >THE POWER OF TWO: a model for material discourse

CAS Symposium at Winchester School of Art, The University of Southampton
8th March 2018

Slides

1st Slide – **BLOCK_CHAIN >THE POWER OF TWO: a model for material discourse**
Project initiated and curated by Susan Francis 2018

<https://block-chain.chapelartsstudios.co.uk/>

Participating artists: **Peter Driver & James McColl * Ashokkumar D Mistry & Karen Wood * Denise Kehoe & Sarah Misselbrook * David Dixon & Gian Cruz * Aldobranti & Jonathan Kelham * Fran Kelly & Rosina Godwin * Benjamin Hartley & James Aldridge**

2nd Slide - **In order to speak about dissent there is a need to develop a vocabulary of dissent.**

Dissent is not a word that we use in everyday language. [click click click]

A list of things to do today:

8 - 9am	breakfast + cleaning the kitchen
9am – 2pm	dissent
2pm – 4pm	siesta
4pm – 5pm	Tesco shopping
5pm – 7pm	reading/painting/yoga
7pm – 8pm	dinner
8pm – 10pm	family time
10:30pm	bed-time

3rd Slide – **“We start from negation, from dissonance. ...”**

John Holloway, *Change the World without taking Power* (2005)

“We start from negation, from dissonance. ...”¹. Jorgensen and Agustin² refer to John Holloway, *Change the World without taking Power* (2005), where he claims that saying ‘No’ is the first step toward dissent. Dissonance definitions: ‘1. Discordant combination of sounds. 2. Lack of agreement or consistency.’³ Further definitions⁴ include: ‘inharmonious’, [click] ‘state of unrest’, [click] ‘unresolved’, [click] ‘disagreements’ and [click] ‘incongruity’. These terms describe different situations that can be associated with dissent. In psychology Cognitive dissonance⁵ suggests ‘discomfort’, [click] ‘mental stress’, [click] ‘simultaneously holds two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values’ [click] and ‘inconsistency’. These may add to a vocabulary of dissent which is fundamental for it gives us conceptual ‘tools’ with which a thinking space can be constructed. Such a vocabulary also emerges and develops from listening to the voice of experience, both, of one’s own and of others. Alongside words, it is enriched by material thinking.

¹ John Holloway, *Change the World without taking Power* (2005) in Bak Jorgensen, M., & Agustin, O. G. (2015). *The Politics of Dissent*. In M. B. Jorgensen, & O. G. Agustin (Eds.), *Politics of Dissent*. (pp. 11-25). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang. (Political and Social Change, Vol. 1).

² Jorgensen and Agustin are researchers in the field of culture and global studies in Aalborg University, Denmark. Their essay was read and discussed at CAS reading group, March 2017.

³ *Collins English Dictionary* (1985) Patrick Hanks, ed., London & Glasgow: Collins p. 427.

⁴ <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/dissonance>.

⁵ Leon Festinger developed the theory of cognitive dissonance in 1957.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_dissonance.

4th Slide - **For example...**

The concept 'dissonance' describes an initial state that helps us recognize a possibility and an intention for dissent. Dissonance is a musical concept which addresses the sense of hearing and, indeed, connects to the other senses. Finding or recognizing a possibility for dissent initially comes from the senses. I feel that something is 'not right'. This feeling provokes questions, thoughts, intentions and actions of dissent.

For example, I walk in the streets of Winchester and see homeless people. I get a strong feeling that something is not right. This leads to questions such as [click] 'how can this still happen in Britain in the 21st century?' [click] 'Who is responsible for this phenomena?' [click] 'What can I do?' This feeling is translated to emotions of sadness, compassion, anger and rage, among others.

5th Slide - **Chantal Mouffe: bring passions back to politics**

According to Chantal Mouffe there is a need to harness passions (as distinct from feelings and emotions) and bring them back to politics, to use them as a force for actions of dissent against the status quo. Mouffe claims: 'The passions cannot be eliminated from politics; they are everywhere. They are part of individuals' make-up.'⁶ Mouffe makes a distinction between passions, which are collective, and feelings and emotions which are individual. She says:

'I take the term "passions" to mean all the emotional forces that are at stake in the creation of collective identities. I disagree with calling these things emotions or feelings. They are not individual passions, they are collective passions.'⁷

6th Slide - **Artists create a link between individuality and the collective**

Artists create a link between individuality and the collective. I want to articulate this link with the help of Karen Barad's theory 'agential realism'. To 'read' BLOCK_CHAIN >THE POWER OF TWO (curated and initiated by Susan Francis; performed by 14 artists) as a model for material discourse.

7th Slide - **Material discourse**

Karen Barad asks: how come words gained the dominant single 'vehicle' for agency and meaning making? And how is it that matter is perceived as inert, passive or lack energy?⁸ Barad writes: '... it seems that at every turn lately every "thing" – even materiality – is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation'.⁹ If matter is perceived only as an end-product, determined by social thinking, it is robbed from its own capacity, for materiality is continuous. In Barad's words:

'To restrict power's productivity to the limited domain of the "social," ... or to figure matter as merely an end product rather than an active factor in further materializations, is to cheat matter out of the fullness of its capacity'.¹⁰

⁶ Enrique Diaz Alvarez, 'Interview with Chantal Mouffe: "Pluralism is linked to the acceptance of conflicts" in <https://dawnssong.blogspot.co.uk/2012/05/pluralism-is-linked-to-acceptance-of.html>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter' (2003)

⁹ Ibid, p. 2.

¹⁰ Ibid p. 11.

8th Slide - **Karen Barad's theory 'agential realism'**

- **'Agential realism'** theory is founded on connectivity: everything is connected
- **Diffraction** 'allows you to study both the nature of the apparatus and also the object'
- **Entanglements** are thinking through and understanding various problems from within
- **Agency** does not belong to a human or a non-human. It is an enactment of possibilities for reconfiguring apparatuses or entanglements
- **Flexible, changeable boundaries** - the process of reconfiguration involves the consideration of what is included in the apparatus and what is excluded
- **Intra-action** - how things intra-act in themselves, among each-other, and in the world
- **Causality** is not linear. Barad calls for thinking causality in all its complexity; as it crosses disciplines and academic 'fields of knowledge'
- **objectivity** as an emergence from intra-actions, as acting with response-ability and accountability

Barad's theory informs and renews some important concepts, combining feminist and Quantum mechanics theories. Barad developed diffraction as a main concept in her 'agential realism' theory, as a practice and a methodology. She refers to a scientific experiment that sets out to discover if light is a wave or a particle. This experiment revealed that the results depend on the set of tools, or apparatus, which is used. (It has been proven that light is both wave and particle. However, waves and particles behave differently. Waves can overlap; two waves can occupy the same place, whereas particles can't). Understanding diffraction by using quantum mechanics 'allows you to study both the nature of the apparatus and also the object'¹¹. This, she claims, is 'not just a matter of interference, but of entanglement, an ethico-onto-epistemological matter.'¹²

As artist-researchers, diffractive methodology can be understood as a state of mind that expects the researcher to examine her/his object of research as it is in the world in which she/he is included.

'Agential realism' theory is founded on connectivity: everything is connected, or in Barad's term, entangled. These entanglements can be reconfigured through revealing their intra-actions. Entanglements are thinking through and understanding various problems from within. Reconfigure entanglements requires rethinking the terms agency, causality, interaction, objectivity and diffraction. Agency – the carrier and mediator of links and meaning - does not belong to a human or a non-human. It is not something that someone has. Rather, agency is an enactment that opens up possibilities for reconfiguring apparatuses or entanglements; apparatuses of bodily production and material discourses including their boundaries. The process of reconfiguration involves the consideration of what is included in the apparatus and what is excluded. The way in which agency is enacted differs from case to case. As Barad said: '[...] the *how* is precisely in the specificity of the particular practices [...].'¹³ [Emphasis in the original text. YNG]. Barad proposes a relationship of intra-action, rather than interaction in the reconfiguration of entanglements. Looking at the relationships, how things intra-act in themselves, among each-other, and in the world, demand the reconsideration of causality. Causality is not linear. As Barad said:

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Barad, K. "Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers", Interview with Karen Barad in "Meeting Utrecht Halfway" June 6, 2009 the *7th European Feminist Research Conference*, hosted by the Graduate Gender Programme of Utrecht University, p. 6.

“Cause and effect are supposed to follow one upon the other like billiard balls”¹⁴; this perception fell short of providing answers and led, in some cases, to evade thinking about causes. On the contrary, she calls for thinking causality in all its complexity; as it crosses disciplines and academic ‘fields of knowledge’. Objectivity as it is practiced both in the sciences and humanist studies traditionally implied distancing and othering. It comes from a world-view that divides the world in binary terms, ‘nature’ on the one side, ‘culture’ on the other. Barad reconceptualises objectivity as an emergence from intra-actions, as acting with response-ability and accountability.

9th Slide - **Block_Chain as a dissenting format for material discourse**

Block_Chain’s format opens a space for a material discourse where materiality can be seen as it is: a continuous, on-going effectivity. It brings the inner connections, or in Barad’s term intra-actions, into public visibility; allowing a discourse in which matter and meaning are entangled and reconfigured; A discourse that does not rely on words as the sole agent for meaning. At its core is an objectivity that comes from participation and collaboration rather than distance and othering; based on response-ability and accountability. Artists are not agents; rather, their artworks are enactments of possibilities for reconfiguring entanglements.

10th Slide - **This symposium is another ‘block’ in the apparatus of Block_Chain**

This symposium is not a singular event but another ‘block’ in the apparatus of Block_Chain. It will be a mistake to ‘read’ this project as virtual. In fact, it gives us the opportunity to move away from yet another binary thinking: virtual-actual. Here, in this space, Block_Chain artists’ works are manifested as physical, tactile blocks. They gain another form of visibility, a mutilation from their earlier version; a mutation.

I want to quote from the dialogue between Gian Cruz and David Dixon. Gian writes: ‘the stronger and deeper we delve into these actualities, the greater the blind spots we induce.’ (13.2.2018) And Dave replies: ‘Blind spots are interesting. They speak of limits.’ (17.2.2018). Blind spots are necessary prompts for creative reconfiguration of entanglements.¹⁵

Looking at the artists’ dialogues of words and images on the internet, I can’t help noticing the screen as an object that, both, connects and fragments. The closer I get to it the greater the blind spots. (Perhaps this explains my recent paintings of screens). However, it is not the case that one must choose between a virtual or actual work, but rather, to be able to bring them together; to ‘read’ this phenomenon as an enriching entanglement.

11th Slide - ‘... we are the biological process that ensures the cell grows, mutates and evolves in unpredictable ways.’ **David Dixon (2013)**

- **Artists are not agents**; rather, they use agency through making artworks where possibilities are examined, tested and enacted
- **Dissent** is a state of consciousness embedded in artists’ actions and works; it is the essence of the link between individuality and public
- **Artworks** are constructed from senses and feelings which transform in the process of making the work into public passions
- **BLOCK_CHAIN>THE POWER OF TWO** is informed by and informs CAS’ vision

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Joan Fontcuberta writes: ‘Every gaze implies a blind spot on the retina; every visual system involves an area of blindness that is the necessary counterpart to the area of elucidation.’ Joan Fontcuberta’s Pandora’s Camera. Photogr@phy After Photography. Quoted by Gian Cruz in BLOCK_CHAIN>THE POWER OF TWO, (Block IV - 13.2.2018).

Slide 12 – Bibliography

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Fontcuberta, J. Pandora's Camera. Photogr@phy After Photography

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