

Honest skin

Affect Mapping and Affective Mark Finding

CAMILA ESTRIN HENRIKSEN

SUPERVISORS

Marit Roland

Anna Svingen-Austestad

University of Agder, 2021

Faculty of Fine Arts

Department of Visual and Performing Arts



Acknowledgements

First of all I want to thank my supervisors Marit and Anna who always kept an open mind about my project and whose positive feedback helped me navigate through it. Their insights offered the clarity to clear the path through what can best be described as a complex, messy process, entangled with emotions and daily chores.

Thanks to Arild, my husband, who is constantly acknowledging my potential and encouraging me to take up new challenges. His commitment during these last few months has been of great help.

Thanks to Malene and Elise, with whom I've been negotiating a lot of playtime and who became accustomed to their mom being locked in her office. I'm grateful that they share the same passion for making stuff; they too see the artistic potential in all kinds of materials.

And, finally, I need to thank my tea bags for providing me with such powerful insights. With each tea bag I empty, my load lightens too. With every patch I sew I reconstruct myself, piece by piece.

Table of contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Acknowledgements | i |
| List of figures..... | v |
| Chapter 1. Introduction | 1 |
| 1.1. Problem statement | 1 |
| 1.2. Research interest and research questions..... | 1 |
| 1.3. Background for this thesis | 3 |
| 1.3.1. Artistic background and mark making..... | 3 |
| 1.4. Perspectives on the thesis | 5 |
| 1.4.1. Perspective on the artistic context..... | 5 |
| 1.4.2. Theoretical perspectives..... | 5 |
| 1.4.3. Methodological perspectives | 5 |
| 1.4.4. Aim of this thesis | 6 |
| 1.4.5. Focus of the work..... | 6 |
| 1.4.6. Limitations | 6 |
| 1.5. Structure of the thesis..... | 7 |
| Chapter 2. Artistic context..... | 9 |
| 2.1. Landscape around artwork made of tea bags | 9 |
| 2.2. Doris Salcedo | 10 |
| 2.2.1. Untitled furniture series or dysfunctional furniture (1989-2008)..... | 11 11 |
| 2.2.2. Disremembered | 13 |
| Chapter 3. Theory..... | 16 |
| 3.1. Introduction..... | 16 |
| 3.2. Critical posthumanism | 16 |
| 3.3. New materialism(s) | 18 |
| 3.4. Actants, assemblages and affect..... | 19 |
| 3.4.1. Actants in Actor-Network theory..... | 19 |
| 3.4.2. Actants in New Materialism | 21 |
| 3.5. Assemblages..... | 21 |
| 3.6. Affect | 22 |
| 3.7. Jane Bennett's <i>Vibrant matter</i> | 23 |
| 3.8. Powers of the hoard: Artistry and agency in a world of vibrant matter | 25 |
| 3.8.1. <i>Slowness</i> | 26 |
| 3.8.2. <i>Porosity and contagion</i> | 27 |
| 3.8.3. <i>Inorganic Sympathy</i> | 28 |
| 3.8.4. Summing up the three qualities..... | 28 |
| Chapter 4. Method..... | 30 |
| 4.1. Method and methodology..... | 30 |
| 4.2. Posthumanist and neo-materialist methodologies..... | 30 |
| 4.3. Artistic research methodologies..... | 32 |
| 4.4. Method | 33 |
| 4.4.1. Affective mark finding..... | 33 |
| 4.5. Ethical considerations..... | 34 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Chapter 5. Process | 35 |
| 5.1. Introduction | 35 |
| 5.2. Theoretical and methodological perspectives | 35 |
| 5.3. The teabag series: | 36 |
| From object to subject and from plaster to wound | 36 |
| 5.3.1. The parchment paper series: traces as physical evidence | 40 |
| 5.3.2. Ink series: The problem with words..... | 44 |
| 5.4. From mark making to mark finding | 47 |
| 5.5. The final product: an honest skin | 47 |
| 5.5.1. The making | 48 |
| 5.6. On a positive note | 50 |
| Chapter 6. Conclusion | 52 |
| 6.1. Back to the research questions | 52 |
| 6.2. Summary of insights | 52 |
| 6.2.1. Theoretical and methodological insights | 52 |
| 6.2.2. Practice-related insights | 53 |
| 6.2.3. Personal insights | 55 |
| 6.3. Limitations | 55 |
| 6.4. Future perspectives | 56 |
| Bibliography | 57 |
| Image sources | 59 |

List of figures

| | |
|---|----|
| Figure 1: Collected tea bags drying | 3 |
| Figure 2: Paper from recycled tea bags..... | 3 |
| Figure 3: Untitled calligraphy no. 3 | 4 |
| Figure 4: Untitled calligraphy no. 4..... | 4 |
| Figure 5: Blankie..... | 9 |
| Figure 6: Dirty Laundry | 9 |
| Figure 7: Obra de té | 9 |
| Figure 8: Cols Cushions..... | 9 |
| Figure 9: Atrabiliarios..... | 10 |
| Figure 10: Plegaria Muda..... | 10 |
| Figure 11: Untitled, 2001 | 12 |
| Figure 12: Untitled, 1998 | 12 |
| Figure 13: Untitled, 2007..... | 12 |
| Figure 14: Untitled, 1998..... | 12 |
| Figure 15: Disremembered I..... | 14 |
| Figure 16: Process of recycling tea bags..... | 36 |
| Figure 17: Tea bags drying | 38 |
| Figure 18: Pile of tea bags exhibiting their <i>thing-power</i> | 38 |
| Figure 19: Tea bag recycling process | 39 |
| Figure 20: First piece of the parchment paper series | 40 |
| Figure 21: 45 parchment papers..... | 43 |
| Figure 22: Mark making with tea bags | 44 |
| Figure 23: Calligraphy with ruling pen..... | 45 |

| | |
|---|----|
| Figure 24: Ink marks left on the guard sheet | 46 |
| Figure 25: Sketches for the final piece | 48 |
| Figure 26: Strips of recycled tea bag paper sewn together | 49 |
| Figure 27: Seam on the front, not pressed | 50 |
| Figure 28: Seam on the back, iron pressed | 51 |
| Figure 29: Seam on the back, not pressed (selected fabric quality)..... | 51 |
| Figure 30: Comparison between the BA and the MFA projects..... | 54 |

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. Problem statement

This work is about trauma and marks, but it is also about the process of identifying the trauma as such informed to a high degree by the materials. I was ready to write that it was about a dialogue between two processes, the personal one and the creative one, until I realised they both were the same. Talking about artistic work in relation to trauma and addressing its potential to cause real changes in real life has a tendency to frame the creative process within the parameters of art-therapy, but that is not the direction I want to take. My focus on this thesis is on the materials themselves and their agentic capacity, what Jane Bennett calls their *thing-power*.

When I started attending the master's course, I was going through a process that allowed me to identify myself as bearing trauma. Experiences that I had lived left marks that, although embodied, were invisible, and their invisible nature had made it possible for me to conceal them even from myself. As I mention at the beginning of this chapter, I grant the artistic process, but more specifically the materials, the capacity of making this realization possible. In recycled tea bags that I collected, used baking parchment paper sheets, and traces of ink, I see my own marks revealed. In engaging with them creatively I open for the possibility of redefining myself outside of trauma.

1.2. Research interest and research questions

Materiality has always been central to my relationship with art. As an audience I've always approached artwork from a sensuous perspective. Works that sparked my curiosity about their materials and their construction were always more interesting to me than works that demanded interpretation. I recall that my growing fascination with art supplies had to do not with what they could do but with their own materiality. It is no secret that art materials have a soothing effect. My taste for calligraphy also comes from a sensuous experience of the materials ink and paper. In writing my BA thesis I was able to locate—albeit from a hermeneutic perspective—that knowledge was produced in my encounter with the materials. To me, that was my main finding and I wanted to bring it with me as an approach to creative work.

On the other hand I was very reluctant to write about my work as I felt that academic writing was inadequate to address artistic processes. But in presenting my approach to calligraphy I was able to locate a friction between form and meaning that went beyond the formalities of a written thesis. It felt very personal. So an enquiry regarding my relationship with words and a resistance to articulate was the starting point that motivated self-inquiry.

Early on I had identified a relationship between visual marks and inner marks: impressions received and impression made. In order to enter an arts-based ethnography summer course, I had to sketch a project proposal addressing how my practice could work as a way of approaching the field. Since the field was a place in conflict, I wrote about how traumatic events leave marks and I used visual marks in mark making as a metaphor for inner marks. At that moment I didn't realize to what degree I was referring to my own marks. In the process of engaging with my materials, different aspects of personal conflict started to emerge, which I explored through the creative work.

There was an exploration of personal conflict and it was guided by the materials or more specifically, by the visual marks on them. So, having identified certain ability on behalf of the materials to evoke and address trauma related marks, my focus turned to them and their agentic capacities. My research question regarding the personal aspect of this work is then, is anchored in these three elements: self-inquiry, an interest on visual marks, and a focus on the materials. Having identified the relationship between visual marks and inner marks, at a personal level, I was able to formulate my research question like this:

RQ 1: How are the marks on recycled tea bags, parchment paper and guard-sheets informing me about my own marks?

And, at the level of the artistic practice, having addressed materiality's potential to contribute to knowledge:

RQ 2: What kind of approach to the creative work could unleash the knowledge-producing potential in the artist's materials?

1.3. Background for this thesis

After finishing my BA in arts and crafts it felt natural to continue studying. In the process of making my BA project I had realized that my work relied largely on my encounter with the techniques and materials and that it was to a great extent process-based. On the one hand I had a great need to do creative work and continue to explore materiality; on the other hand I felt that an academic context could be a favourable setting for that kind of exploration. Consequently, I saw the master program as a continuation of the work I did for my BA project, which consisted in four pieces of calligraphy and mark making. And I thought I would continue to work within that discipline. But as I started the MFA course, one particular material that I used in those four pieces kept calling me back, used tea bags. In my BA project the tea bag papers had acquired the meaning of a plaster covering a wound. At one point after that, as they accumulated during the process of letting them dry, I started to see the tea bags as something other than objects. As a result, one of the inquiry elements of this work has to do with that call issued from the tea bags and others materials that I will later address.



Figure 1: Collected tea bags drying.



Figure 2: Paper from recycled tea bags.

1.3.1. Artistic background and mark making

As I mention in the problem statement, my creative process is deeply connected with personal conflict. In the process chapter I am going to address some aspects of it that are connected to my cultural identity. For that reason I see relevant here to specify that I am an Argentine with a multicultural background and that I have been living in Norway for twelve years. Practice wise, I have a background in graphic design and theatre, and a

bachelor degree in arts and crafts. Most of the artwork I have done was produced during my BA studies at UiA. During that time, I was able to use some of my projects to return to calligraphy, a discipline I became acquainted with when studying graphic design. But I was also able to experiment with different materials and I became highly interested in the textile field. This is reflected in my BA thesis where I incorporate cotton thread to my calligraphic practice. Although I had defined myself as a visual artist until now, I realise that crafting is a very strong component in my work and the work that I'm producing for this thesis places me closer to the textile art field.

When talking about my process I often refer to my BA work, which is based on calligraphy and mark making and some calligraphic experimentation is also part of this process. Therefore, I consider it relevant to define these two terms in relation to my work. Mark making is a term used to describe the different marks in a work of art. Marks can be thought of as small units of formal elements: a single mark is a dot, an extended mark makes a line, a cluster of marks form a shape, and a repetition of marks creates a texture. Calligraphy is a discipline related to writing and modern uses of it, such as abstract or expressive calligraphy, have a strong mark-making component. The calligraphic line itself is regarded as a mark due to its formal features. Texture and other forms for mark making, such as splashes of ink and non-textual calligraphic marks have a protagonist role in the artwork. Alternative writing tools such as sticks, branches or stones are also

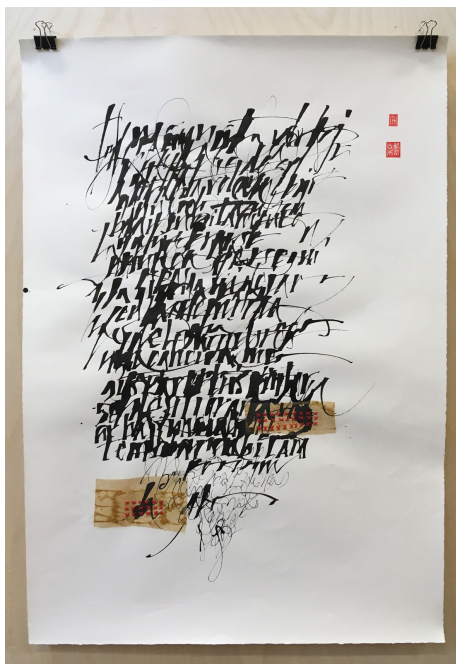


Figure 1: Untitled calligraphy no. 3, 2018. Paper, ink, recycled tea bags and cotton thread.

Figure 2: Untitled calligraphy no. 4 (Detail), 2018. Paper, ink, recycled tea bags and cotton thread.

commonly used both for writing and making marks. Along with my calligraphic practice I became increasingly interested in mark making and which became very relevant as an entry point to this project. But as I will point out in the process chapter, I identify a shift from mark making to mark finding.

1.4. Perspectives on the thesis

1.4.1. Perspective on the artistic context

There is a proliferation of artwork made of tea bags and I will show some of those that I feel have something in common with mine. But, because the use of tea bags in my case is circumstantial and because the information I could find about the artists and their processes is scarce, I feel that placing myself in that field is not enough to account for my process. To complement this, I will review the work of visual artist and sculptor Doris Salcedo who I identify with at two specific points: her exploration of trauma and her reliance on materiality.

1.4.2. Theoretical perspectives

Jane Bennett's account of *thing-power*—specifically its three qualities that she identifies: slowness, porosity and contagion; and inorganic sympathy—offers a language that is very visual. These three concepts allow me to imagine not only what it is that these collected materials are doing to me, but also how, activating my materials in a visual poetic way. Departing from the wish that my marks had been more visible to the outside, I put these three concepts to work. I imagine a coat-like garment as a layer of honest skin. By the action of these thing-powers the garment has the ability of absorbing the wearer's marks and make them visible. The marks on the fabric, which is made of the paper from used tea bags, indicate that garment's work is done and hopefully the wearer's burden is lightened.

1.4.3. Methodological perspectives

When it comes to addressing methods, I find it problematic to place myself within the parameters of qualitative research, which is the model the structure of this thesis responds to. For that reason, I find it necessary to address artistic research methodologies as they allow locating knowledge production at the center of the artistic practice as well as

calling for new inventive methods according to the practice. It also seems adequate to address the posthuman neo-materialistic nature of my process as an approach in its own right. Such approaches focus on processes rather than outcomes and allow knowledge to be produced outside of human subjectivity, like in my case, tea bags.

1.4.4. Aim of this thesis

In trying to answer the research questions I emphasise not on the process of making the final product, which is still in the making, but on the process of knowledge production as emergent from the practice. This text then, aims to locate knowledge production at the intersection of materiality, artistic practice and process. And I intend to do that by mapping through a neo-materialistic lens those moments in the process in which new understandings emerged. I find it useful here to address the starting points for this work and then describe the trajectory of my focus along the process.

1.4.5. Focus of the work

For the practical aspect of this work, I started out of an interest in the materials and the artistic practice. Then my focus moved to the affect produced between the materials and me, which is what I call the process. From this process, knowledge emerged. In the light of theory, this knowledge produced a concept, which is what gave form to the final product.

For the methodological aspect my starting point was located at the center of the artistic practice. Then my focus moved on to theory, which contributed with a vocabulary that reinforced the artistic practice. And later, at the intersection of the theory and the practice, I was able to conceptualise my method.

1.4.6. Limitations

When writing about my work I'm afraid that it is expected for the concepts and ideas I write about to be communicated by the created piece. So what I want to write about is not the final product but the process of how the artwork came to be. Linking it to *critical posthuman* neo-materialistic perspectives will allow me to discuss the creative process

outside the parameters of hermeneutics, and thus beyond interpretation. Within the *critical posthuman* discourse I identify the concepts of *actant*, *affect* and *assemblage* as key to account for a non-hierarchical, relational and embodied approach to creative work like the one taking place in my process.

1.5. Structure of the thesis

Chapter one offers a general idea of what this thesis is about, what it aims to account for and what kind of artwork I'm producing. It includes an introduction of myself, my background and my artistic practice, as well as the background for this work.

In chapter two, I will contextualize my work by mapping an emerging field of tea bag art, locating mine in relation to those who use tea bags as a textile material. But I will also present the work of the Colombian sculptor Doris Salcedo, whose two main features, materiality and trauma, are also very present in my work.

In chapter three, I introduce post-human new materialistic perspectives through Jane Bennett's ontology of Vibrant Matter. Her concept of *thing-power* and its three qualities, *slowness*, *porosity* and *contagion*, and *inorganic sympathy*, are central to my creative process. I will also address the concepts of *actant*, *assemblages* and *affect* as relevant to my work.

Chapter four is about method. In it I will address critical posthumanism and new materialism as methodological approaches to research. I will also identify my inquiry as artistic research to locate the production of knowledge as emergent from the practice. Finally, I will conceptualise the way I worked throughout the process by proposing affective mark finding as a method.

In chapter five, I will try to map the moments in which knowledge was produced in tune with the materials. Seeing those moments through the lens of Bennett's thing-powers will allow me to locate the emergent knowledge in the affect between the materials and me. This way I distance myself from the interpretation. I will also describe how these concepts come to play in the idea of the final piece and give some technical details of the construction.

In chapter six, I will summarize the insights of this inquiry. Then I will compare this process with my previous from the BA project and draw on whether they are related or not. To sum up, I will draw on future perspectives both as a practitioner and as a practitioner-researcher.

Chapter 2. Artistic context

2.1. Landscape around artwork made of tea bags

There is a field of artwork made of tea bags where I may or may not belong. From being used as canvases for tiny paintings to structural units in sculptural objects, or being treated as fabric in the construction of textile pieces, tea bags are being used in artwork to convey meaning. The intentions for using tea bags are as varied as the field itself. While using recycled materials is what motivates some makers, others seek to evoke the nursing effect of a warm cup of tea or to convey caring. By looking at these works I can sense that something of the experience that I have with the tea bags is shared. In that sense I can relate to them. Unfortunately, very few of these artists talk about their process or their experience of the materials, which is what makes it difficult for me to use them to talk about my work. Another challenge to contextualising my work within this field is that in



Figure 5: Blankie, 2012. Ruth Tabancay: Hand stitched tea bags, embroidery floss, muslin, batting (<https://www.ruthtabancay.com/work/tea-bags>)

Figure 6: Dirty Laundry, 2009. Carien Quiroga (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/carienquiroga/8022022622/in/photostream/>)

Figure 7: Obra de té, 2010. Valeria Burgoa (https://www.flickr.com/photos/valeria_burgoa/4784065339/in/album-72157605775742292/)

Figure 8: Cols Cushions, 2010. Kim Schoenberger: Recycled tea bags, tea leaves, thread and calico (<https://www.kimschoenberger.com/exhibitions/expressions-of-love-2010/?pid=34#gallery/682b7f8ca96c9e4961cd43bfca6d78a/34>)

my case the use of tea bags is circumstantial. The fact that my work ended up being a textile piece made of tea bags is the result of a process that was informed by the tea bags themselves (among with other materials) and this has to do with trauma. It comes from a different place than wanting to use tea bags as a medium. In this respect I can more or less place myself in the category of those who treat tea bags as textile material, but contextualising my work within this field alone would be incomplete. Yet, the field of tea bag art exists, and it would be unfair not to refer to it. So I will show a selection of works with the purpose of mapping the terrain, but my analysis will focus on Salcedo's work.

2.2. Doris Salcedo

Doris Salcedo is a contemporary visual artist and sculptor whose work is committed to mourn the victims of political violence. Her work, strongly material-based and installation- based, is influenced by the ongoing-armed conflict in her native Colombia between far-left guerrilla groups, the military, drug traffickers, and paramilitary forces. Salcedo manages to convey trauma, pain and loss through materiality while at the same time creating a space for memory and proper mourning of those whose tragic deaths remain anonymous. And by doing so, she expands the private act of mourning into a collective dimension. In many of her works she presents the personal items of victims, at



Figure 9: Atrabiliarios (detail), 1992/2004. Doris Salcedo. Shoes, drywall, paint, wood, animal fiber, and surgical thread. Photo: © Doris Salcedo.

[\(https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/atrabiliarios/\)](https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/atrabiliarios/)

**Figure 10: Plegaria Muda, 2008–10. Doris Salcedo. Wood, concrete, earth, and grass
Photo: Patrizia Tocci.**

[\(https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/plegaria_muda/\)](https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/plegaria_muda/)

first literally and later symbolically; in that way her sculptural objects often become surrogate of the missing person: clothing items in her furniture series and worn women shoes in *Atrabilarios* incarnate the presence of the missing person. A wooden table becomes a coffin or a woman's body. Through international recognition, her work has expanded to address global violence-related problems such as gun, gender and race violence, human trafficking and displacement. There are two main aspects of her work that I specifically relate to: the fact that she works based on traumatic events and the central role of materiality in her work. I will briefly analyse two of her works to talk about materiality and visual poetry, and I will later try to draw on the differences and commonalities between her work and what I made. Since Salcedo's work has been approached through a theoretical lens, there is language already in place that I feel describes her work very accurately and that I find difficult to replace with my own words. For that reason, when introducing the works I will use the description offered by the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, whose website features Salcedo's work, and use my own wording to analyse them.

2.2.1. Untitled furniture series or dysfunctional furniture (1989-2008)

Throughout her career, Salcedo has conducted extensive interviews with victims of political violence, transforming their experiences into sculptures that convey a sense of how their everyday lives are disrupted. The sculptures in this series span nearly two decades. Salcedo used only those materials that would be readily available to these victims, the majority of whom live in rural, impoverished areas of Colombia. She filled domestic furniture—such as armoires, bed frames, dressers, tables, and chairs—with concrete and, at times, clothing, rendering them functionless. She explains: “The way that an artwork brings materials together is incredibly powerful. Sculpture is its materiality. I work with materials that are already charged with significance, with a meaning they have acquired in the practice of everyday life.

Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

The first time I looked into Salcedo's work I came across one of these dysfunctional furniture pieces. Without knowing about her work, it immediately reminded me of *los desaparecidos* (the disappeared) in Argentina. Colombians and Argentines share this awareness of the political figure of the *disappeared* that refers to people, usually activists on the left, who were kidnapped and killed by military forces during periods of political violence. It is the combination of cement and clothes that guides this impression. In the

context of the military dictatorship in Argentina, the use of concrete has a particular connotation: after months of being disappeared people were thrown into the river from a plane, unconscious but still alive with their feet in concrete so the body wouldn't float. To me being in the presence of one of these furniture pieces is like being in the presence of the *disappeared*. At the same time I can imagine that some of that experience would remain the same even if I didn't have this shared piece of history with the artist. Clothing items inevitably direct us to the person; unless worn, properly stored or exhibited in apparel, clothes ask questions. The clothes embedded in concrete have a double effect: on



Figure 11: Untitled, 2001. Doris Salcedo. Wooden armoire, wooden cabinet with glass, concrete, steel, and clothing. (<https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/untitled-concrete/>)

Figure 12: Untitled (Detail), 1998. Doris Salcedo. Wooden cabinet, concrete, steel, and clothing. Photo: David Heald. (<https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/untitled-concrete/>)

Figure 13: Untitled, 2007. Doris Salcedo. Wooden armoire, wooden chair, concrete, and steel. Photo: Todd-White Art Photography. (<https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/untitled-concrete/>)

Figure 14: Untitled, 1998. Doris Salcedo. Wooden cabinet with glass, concrete, steel, and clothing. Photo: David Heald. (<https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/untitled-concrete/>)

the one hand they reinforce the absence of the person as they beg the question of where is the body. On the other hand the absence is so present that the clothes take the place of the missing person and one is suddenly feeling their presence. Seeing objects once familiar become uncanny right before one's eyes has a very unsettling effect. Objects that were once familiar and part of our daily lives have now become alien and impossible to use; life is disrupted. The uselessness of the object now filled with concrete talks to me about an amputated sense of life left by the disappearance of a loved one. How do you breathe while not knowing what happened to that person, how do you get up, how do you open a cupboard? It's mourning made impossible. The drawers are empty of what was familiar yet not vacant: they are filled with an emptiness that is made of a very dense materiality. Salcedo talks about her materials from a semiotic place as she sees them loaded with meaning, and in the case of these works I readily admit that I see them from a similar place too. At the same time I feel that the agentic capacity of the materials themselves allows experiencing the work beyond the symbolism of visual poetry.

2.2.2. Disremembered

Each of these three sculptures is made of woven raw silk and nearly 12,000 needles. They developed out of years of research into what Salcedo perceives to be society's inability to mourn. At the core of this investigation is a lack of empathy that pervades public life, in which one person's loss is not registered by others, and instead those in mourning become stigmatized, adding to their pain. When viewed from different angles, the details of the sculpture oscillate between visible and invisible: the glint of the nickel and the sheen of the silk appear and disappear simultaneously like a fading memory. The work thus embodies a sense of paradox. Beautiful yet dangerous, it is unclear whether these sculptures, with their thousands of needles, are intended to protect or to harm.

Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

The pieces of *Disremembered* were inspired by meetings with several mothers in Chicago who have lost children to gun violence. I find this work particularly useful to talk about mine beyond the similarity of both being garments as they seek to evoke the bodily aspect of pain. These blouses look ethereal and lightweight from a distance and there is also something ghostly to them. But as you get closer, and the needles that the fabric is made of become visible, you realize that not only are the blouses heavy but they are also painful to wear. The absence of the wearer can give some sense of relief though: if the blouse is not being worn then the wearer is having a break from pain. As mentioned in the description, depending on the angle, the blouses alternate between visible and invisible. When talking about the process in an interview, Salcedo refers to the mourning process as something that doesn't end; it continues throughout (in this case the mother's) life often silently, which is what this visible/invisible quality of the blouse is about. Grief is often regarded as immaterial but it is not; it is physical, it takes place at a specific place of the brain and it feels in parts of the body, something the needles successfully convey. *Disremembered* is one of the bodies of work reunited under the exhibition curated by the



Figure 15: *Disremembered I* (left) and detail picture (right), 2014. Doris Salcedo. Sewing needles and silk thread. Courtesy of Diane and Bruce Halle.
(<https://www3.mcchicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/disremembered/>)

Harvard Art Museums entitled *The materiality of mourning*, a title I think sums it up beautifully. Something similar is what I imagined for my coat. The same way the needles in Salcedo's blouses are not there to inflict pain, but are the pain itself, the tea bags in my work are the wearer's own marks. And in both cases the absence of the wearer can provide some sort of relief.

To sum up, I see trauma as a common point to both Salcedo's work and mine, although we approach it from different perspectives. She talks about other people's experiences as she acknowledges "My work is based on experiences I lack (...) Therefore, it is made from an unfamiliar, unstable place, simultaneously strange and proper" (Salcedo, 2016, p. xvii). I, on the other hand, talk about my own experience (in this case with trauma), and I hope the piece I make manages to convey some of that experiential aspect. This is also what Salcedo's work does: it manages to perform the experiential aspect of the testimonies she collects. We both rely on materiality to convey and explore trauma related issues, which is where I identify with the artist. But our approaches to materiality are different. Salcedo approaches materials from a semiotic place; she looks for connotation bearing materials to communicate a certain idea. My starting point is in the materials themselves: I see them as agentic rather than signifying, so the idea of my work comes from the affect that occurs between the materials and me. I must point out the technical differences between our works. Salcedo works with a large team of people to produce large-scale installations and each work often requires years of material research and much assistance. I, on the other hand, work from the micro-scale of the personal and produce pieces that I can make with my own hands. Comparisons aside, my aim is to point out to the two main aspects of Salcedo's work that make me identify with her: working with trauma-related themes and a reliance on the power of materiality.

Chapter 3. Theory

3.1. Introduction

As I mention in the introduction, I'm focusing on Jane Bennett's theory of vital materialism (Bennett, 2010) and the language that she develops along with it, specifically her concept of thing-power, to talk about material agency in relation to my work. Hers is a neo-materialistic perspective and since New Materialism is intrinsically related to posthumanism, or at least with *the posthuman* proposed by Rosi Braidotti (2013), I will briefly introduce both approaches to give a context to Bennett's theory. Then I'll return to critical posthumanism and new materialism in more detail under the Methodology chapter since both represent as much a theoretical turn as methodological approaches to inquiry. The notions of *actant*, *affect* and *assemblage* appear repeatedly in Bennett's work(s) as well as in the critical posthuman discourse. Not only do these three terms indicate an ontological shift, but they also serve to describe the embodied, relational and affective posthuman subject that critical posthumanism accounts for. I'll present briefly these three concepts in the context of Latour, Deleuze and Guattari (and later Massumi), and Bennett herself. At the same time I'll try to explain how these concepts may play out in my process.

3.2. Critical posthumanism

The term *posthuman* has been used by different authors to represent various—and occasionally opposing—ideas related to what it is to be human or to imagine possible futures for humanity. From dreams of technologically-enhanced-near-to-immortal humans to imagining a future without humans at all, to more critical approaches (the first two belonging to mainstream schools of thought and the third to academia), the term *posthumanism* is a term that can lead to confusion (Herbrechter, 2013, p.16). In the context of theory, the prefix *post-* does not mean "after" (like in post-modernism) but rather signifies a desire to go beyond the human (Herbrechter, 2017), in other words, the *post-* in *posthuman* accounts for human and beyond. From now on I will only refer to *The Posthuman* (Braidotti, 2013), a term proposed by scholar Rosi Braidotti. Instead of

adding a ninth category of posthumanism to the list¹ of existing posts-, scholar Rosi Braidotti's proposes *The Posthuman* as a condition and an analytical tool that accounts for the contemporary human who is globally interconnected, technologically mediated and chronologically situated in our current epoch that many scholars refer to as the *Anthropocene*, a term proposed to address "the historical moment when the Human has become a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet" (Braidotti 2013, p. 5). She, as well as many other theorists, issues a critique to the dominance of the humanist ideal in the humanities: "The Cartesian subject of the cogito, the Kantian 'community of reasonable beings' (Braidotti, 2013, p.1) or as Deleuze and Guattari point out, "the average adult-white-heterosexual-European-male-speaking a standard language" (Deleuze/Guattari 1987, p. 105) as the intellectual measure for humanity. This ideal not only puts *Man* as the only possible knowing subject but also excludes everybody else: women, indigenous, poor, disabled (to name just a few) from the human condition, with the dangers that a dehumanized view of the other brings. Braidotti addresses the need to reformulate what it means to be human in our time and proposes Critical Posthumanism as a theoretical approach that has its foundations at the convergence of posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism. "The former focuses on the critique of the humanist ideal of *Man* as the allegedly universal measure of all things, while the latter criticizes species hierarchy and human exceptionalism" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 32). Methodologically, Braidotti proposes the *Critical Posthumanities* as a cross-disciplinary field of inquiry "that no longer assumes the knowing subject as *homo universalis*² or *anthropos*³, but that is relational, embodied, embedded and interconnected in a web of human and non-human agents" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 31).

¹ See the different kinds of posthumanism: insurgent (Papadopoulos, 2010); speculative (Sterling, 2014; Roden, 2014); cultural (Herbrechter, 2013) and literary (Nayar, 2013); trans-humanism (Bostrom, 2014); meta-humanism (Ferrando, 2013) and a-humanism (MacCormack, 2014). There is already a posthuman manifesto (Pepperell, 2003) and a posthumanities book series (Wolfe, 2010).

² From Latin: *homo universalis*, "universal man", is an individual whose knowledge spans a substantial number of subjects. But I think Braidotti is referring more specifically to these values incarnated in the figure of the white heterosexual man.

³ Greek for human.

3.3. New materialism(s)

For the past two decades the social sciences and the humanities have seen the emergence of a *new materialism* (see, for example, Hird, 2004; Ahmed, 2008; Coole and Frost, 2010a). It is *new* in the sense that it re-reinterprets and develops in new directions an already existing *materialist* tradition in Western philosophy that engages with matter as vital force. New materialist scholarship does not represent a homogeneous style of thought; it emerges from various disciplines (Lemke, 2015, p. 1). With thinkers such as Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Jane Bennett, Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, “new materialism has emerged mainly from the front lines of feminism, philosophy, science studies, and cultural theory, yet it cuts across and is cross-fertilized by both the human and natural sciences” (Sencindiver, 2017). This re-emergence of materialist ontologies is rooted in a general discontent with the limitations of language to address “the material realities of both humans and non-humans” (Sanzo, 2018). Yet, it does not look away from the linguistic turn but rather builds up on it: “Theoretical perspectives and empirical studies that focus on the diverse and plural forms of materiality are replacing or complementing research on social constructions, cultural practices and discursive processes” (Lemke, 2015). “All new materialisms embrace the vitality of matter, particularly as it encompasses the nonhuman as well as the human” (Sanzo, 2018).

Since new materialism is an active field of knowledge production and there are constantly new perspectives emerging from within, it is very difficult to map the terrain. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost give an overview of the new materialisms grouping them in three main categories: *ontology, agency and politics* (Coole & Frost, 2010). In this chapter I focus on new materialist Jane Bennett, who could easily fit in the agency/politics categories proposed by Coole and Frost. It is mainly the agentic capacity of things I’m concerned with regarding my creative process. The perception of a certain power emerging from the tea bags is what inspired an inquiry that resulted in understanding that I saw those tea bags as my body and the marks on them as my own, now revealed. Bennett’s concept of *thing-power* and its qualities, which I’ll discuss in chapter 4.3, are the ideas my work is built upon. Not only did these concepts help me imagine *how* it is that I see those marks on the tea bags as mine, but they also sparked a rich repertoire of visual poetry which gave rise to the idea of the final piece. What I argue, based on my

18

experience with Lacanian psychoanalysis's failure to address the reality of my context, is that this understanding comes not from my subjectivity but from an affect produced by the tea bags, the parchment papers and the ink traces. Both this attentiveness to material agency and the fact that I see the creative work as the materialization of a process, are why I see fit contextualizing my work within a new materialistic perspective.

3.4. Actants, assemblages and affect

In *Vibrant Matter* Bennett “shifts her focus from the human experience of things to things themselves”⁴. For now if I had to (over)simplify what Bennett says in one sentence I would put it like this: matter has the *agentic capacity* of attracting other bodies (human and non-human) to form *assemblages* capable of creating *affect*. So it seems relevant to introduce these three terms that, in the context of critical posthumanism, play a central role in giving account of a non-hierarchical, embodied and affective relationship with the world. In other words, *actant*, *assemblage* and *affect* are important pieces of the (critical) posthuman glossary. There is of course much more to the theories I'll use to explain them, but I will limit myself to explaining them in relation to these three terms since my focus is on Bennett.

3.4.1. Actants in Actor-Network theory

In the context of social science, *agency* is defined as the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices, while *structure* is the group of factors (such as culture, religion, gender, ethnicity, etc.) that determine an agent's behaviour. Following the tradition in the humanities where social theory is centred on human activity, the notion of *agency* was only applied to humans. But critical posthumanist theory emphasises on the agency and responsiveness of non-humans (Carranza, 2018).

Bruno Latour⁵ develops an inclusive understanding of agency in his Actor-Network Theory (ANT) by identifying both human and non-human *actants*⁶ within a network of

⁴ Extracted from the book review from Duke University Press: <https://www.dukeupress.edu/vibrant-matter>

⁵ Bruno Latour (born June 1947) is a contemporary French philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist. Along with Michel Callon and John Law, Latour is one of the primary developers of actor-network theory (ANT), a

shifting relationships. Latour defines an actant as “something that acts or to which activity is granted by others. It implies no special motivation of human individual actors, nor of humans in general (Latour, 373).” Agency emerges from the interaction between actants; in other words, agency is equally distributed between human and non-humans.

A brief example of an actor-network would be the simple act of buying a cup of coffee at a coffee shop with a credit card. There are technological, human and social actants involved in this network. The card itself, the chip, the post-net machine and the electricity are some of the technological actants. There are humans involved, like the buyer, the coffee shop employee and the people involved in the production and distribution of the coffee. And some of the social actants would be the policies around food and beverage retail, the bank used for the payment and the telecommunications that the post-net relies on, among others.

Actor-network theory opposes social determinism⁷ in that it puts all elements of a network at the same level. Extending agency to non-human actants helps also deconstruct the subject/object binary that derives from mind-body dualism because as agency is distributive it cannot be bound to a subject. This account of how things work has many points in common with Deleuze’s and Guattari’s concept of assemblage.

Diana Coole, like Latour, is wary of employing the concept of *agency* at all because it was historically formulated as proprietary to human subjects. Instead, she uses the term *agentic capacity* to describe Latour’s actants as anything that has the ability to “make a difference, produce effects and affects and alter the course of events by their action”

theoretical and methodological approach to social theory where everything in the social and natural worlds exists in constantly shifting networks of relationships.

⁶ The term *actant* comes from narratology, the study of narrative. A. J. Greimas (1917-1992) developed the term to refer to six basic roles in a story that are integral to the narrative but may or may not be occupied by a human character.

⁷ Social determinism is the theory that social interactions and constructs alone determine individual behaviour (as opposed to biological or objective factors).

(Coole, 2013). Both *agency* and *agentic capacity* are used interchangeably across the many *neo-materialist* perspectives.

3.4.2. Actants in New Materialism

Similarly to Latour, vital materialists such as Rosi Braidotti and Jane Bennett draw upon the philosophical traditions of Nietzsche, Spinoza, as well as Deleuze and Guattari to conceive of matter not as inert substance but as a lively vital force (Carranza, 2018). Contrary to animistic ontologies, where attributing a soul to matter is what gives it agency, vitalism acknowledges an agentic life force inherent to all things grounded in their own materiality or as Bennett would put it, in their own thing-ness. Bennett, whose theory I'm focusing on, directs her attention to inanimate matter and defines vitality as the "capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (Bennett, 2010, p. viii).

In this thesis I use the terms *actant* and *agency* interchangeably to refer to the agentic capacities of my materials. When I do so, I'm not disregarding agency's distributed quality, but I'm focusing on the portion of the agency corresponding to the thing, or in Bennett's language their *thing-power*. In identifying my materials as actants I am automatically acknowledging their vital force.

3.5. Assemblages

In chapter two of *Vibrant matter* Bennett develops a theory of *distributed* agency and she does so by addressing the *Agency of assemblages*. The concept of *assemblage* explores the way material systems self-organize; the term is borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who extend this notion to the realm of the social. Drawing on their work, Bennett defines assemblages as "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. (...) The effects generated by an assemblage are, rather, emergent properties, emergent in that their ability to make something happen (a newly inflected materialism, a blackout, a hurricane, a war on terror) is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone" (Bennett, 2010, pp.23-24). In short, she is attributing the assemblage a greater or different agency than the one issuing from the individual pieces, which cannot be reduced to the sum of them. She exemplifies this

notion of assemblages, and their enhanced agency, with a huge blackout that took place in USA and extended to Canada in 2003. In identifying some of the actants involved, like the structure of the power plants, the way electricity travels, the legislation and the user's demand of power, among others, she gives account of agency as “distributed along a continuum, extrude(ing) from multiple sites or many loci —from a quirky electron flow and a spontaneous fire to members of Congress who have a neoliberal faith in market self regulation” (Bennett, 2010, p. 28).

I find the notion of assemblages useful to account for the self-organizing nature in my process. When I say that the marks on the tea bags, parchment paper and ink traces informed my process, I'm identifying my materials as actants and therefore locating them in a network of relations. The same way I can identify myself, ten years of Norwegian culture, the different approaches to therapy (Lacanian and embodied), among other people, materials and events, as actants. In that way the process could be seen as an assemblage to whose emergent property to allow me identify my trauma.

3.6. Affect

Affect is a concept that comes from Spinoza's philosophy, later redefined by Deleuze and Guattari and subsequently by Massumi, which emphasizes on embodied experience. Spinoza identifies affects as states of the body and the mind that are related to but different from emotions. The way Deleuze and Guattari use this notion distinguishes more sharply between affects and emotions. Massumi gives the following definition in his notes on the translation of *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987):

“L'affect (Spinoza's affectus) is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act. L'affection (Spinoza's affectio) is each such state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body (with body taken in its broadest possible sense to include "mental" or ideal bodies)” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. xvii)

The notion of affects accounts for the embodied experience and its key to the posthuman perspective, which approaches the subject as embodied as opposed to body-mind-divided. Affect is intrinsically connected to the notion of agency. From a neo-materialistic standpoint, when I talk about the agency of the materials in my process, what I'm referring to is their agentic capacity of creating affect. Affect is relevant to my process as it is where I locate the production of knowledge. When I identify moments in my process in which knowledge is produced, it is out a sense of a visceral response, not out of interpretation.

To sum up, the notion of actant is relevant to account for a human decentered perspective like new materialism. Assemblages give account of a self-organized process but also of a distributed agency across human and non-human actants. And affect focuses on the embodied experience and therefore approaches the subject as somatic rather than socially constructed.

3.7. Jane Bennett's *Vibrant matter*

In *Vibrant Matter* (Bennett, 2010) philosopher and political theorist Jane Bennett proposes both a philosophical and a political project. In the philosophical one, she develops the theory of *vital materialism*, in which she addresses the agency of things and locates this agency in their very (vibrant) materiality. Without disregarding agency's distributed nature, she directs her attention to the part of the agency issuing from matter. She takes a post-phenomenological stand and separates herself from Heideggerian phenomenology by making a distinction between *object* and *thing*, departing also from object-oriented ontologies. She argues that phenomenology's reliance on human subjectivity makes it impossible to see things as anything other than objects. Instead, she proposes to understand things in their own *thingness* by developing the concept of *thing-power* which addresses the inherent liveliness in all things and attributes them the agentic capacity of attracting other bodies, human and non-human, into assemblages capable creating affect: "Thing-power gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence of aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience" (Bennett, 2010, p. xvi). It is important to note that Bennett does not locate agency solely in the material; she acknowledges the

distributive quality of agency as emergent from human/non-human assemblages in the same way Actor-Network theory does. But for the sake of simplification, when I talk about material agency, I will be referring to the portion of the agency that belongs to the thing. In the political project, Bennett proposes to abandon the view of things as mute, inert matter and adopting *vital materialism* instead. To think ourselves and the world around us as lively interconnected materiality, she argues, could lead to more ethical and sustainable choices regarding our politics of ecology like the extraction of natural resources, how we treat waste and what we eat, among other consumption habits.

Although I find both projects equally interesting, this thesis focuses on her philosophical project, more accurately, on her concept of *thing-power*. Bennett continues to elaborate on this idea and suggests three qualities of thing-power, all of which are central to my work. With these three concepts, which I will introduce in a few moments, she explains not only *what* things can do, but also *how*. Or, in her own words, she takes up on the “paradoxical task of trying to enunciate the nonlinguistic expressivity of things” (Bennett, 2012, p. 267).

But first I will focus on *thing-power*. In the book's first chapter, Bennett narrates her encounter with a tableau-like assemblage of random trash items. By doing so, she identifies the *affect* that they produced on her: a singular awareness of their vital force. She describes how otherwise random mute objects had constituted themselves in actants and exhibited their thing-power:

On a sunny Tuesday morning on 4 June in the grate over the storm drain to the Chesapeake Bay in front of Sam's Bagels on Cold Spring Lane in Baltimore, there was:

one large men's black plastic work glove
one dense mat of oak pollen
one unblemished dead rat
one white plastic bottle cap
one smooth stick of wood

Glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick. As I encountered these items, they shimmied back and forth between debris and thing — between, on the one hand, stuff to ignore, except insofar as it betokened human activity (the workman's efforts, the litterer's toss, the rat-poisoner's success), and, on the other hand, stuff that commanded attention in its own right, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects. In the second moment, stuff exhibited its thing-power: it issued a call, even if I did not quite understand what it was saying. At the very least, it provoked affects in me: I was repelled by the dead (or was it merely sleeping?) rat and dismayed by

the litter, but I also felt something else: a nameless awareness of the impossible singularity of that rat, that configuration of pollen, that otherwise utterly banal, massproduced plastic water-bottle cap. (Bennett, 2010, p. 4)

She then continues to exemplify other instances of thing-power: a gunpowder residue on a glass container constitutes itself as legal actant; a Kafkaian non-human character seems to have nomadic life of its own, and she even addresses the thing-ness in humans, as we are a collaboration between organic and inorganic matter ourselves. By addressing the effects of their agentic capacities, she locates their power in their *vital materiality*.

I find the concept of thing-power very relevant to my process as it locates the agentic capacities of things in their very materiality. I'm granting my materials, tea bags, parchment papers and guard sheets, more precisely the marks on them, the agentic capacity of accessing an embodied knowledge that couldn't be accessed by language. And I identify their agency as emergent from their physicality, or in Bennett's language, their *vital materiality*, as opposed to adopting an animistic view. Next, I will introduce the three concepts that Bennett elaborates after 2010,. These three concepts were all key to my creative process and the idea that gave form to the final piece, the honest skin.

3.8. Powers of the hoard: Artistry and agency in a world of vibrant matter

This is the title of the inaugural lecture given by Jane Bennett in the context of a two-year exploration of the concept of *thingness* by the Vera List Center for Art and Politics, which later came to form part of a book. In it, she continues to develop the concept of *thing-power*. In exploring the phenomenon of hoarding⁸ to find how thing-power operates, Bennett identifies three features of thing-power. She bases her observations on a reality show called *Hoarders*⁹, which features real-life people who struggle with hoarding

⁸ People with hoarding disorder excessively save items that others may view as worthless. They have persistent difficulty getting rid of or parting with possessions, leading to clutter that disrupts their ability to use their living or work spaces. Hoarding is not the same as collecting.

⁹ *Hoarders* is an American reality television series that debuted on A&E on 2009. The show depicts the real-life struggles and treatment of people who suffer from compulsive hoarding disorder.

disorder. The episodes feature cases of extreme hoarding: hoards so out of control that they have become hazardous, and the hoarders, usually in the face of eviction, have no choice but to accept the help of a team to clean their houses. The hoarder is accompanied throughout the process by a mental health professional and there are usually family interventions. Throughout the show we follow the house cleaning development parallel to the hoarder's progress.

Bennett notices that hoarders have a special openness to the *call of things* that allows them to see past their utility and therefore become deeply attached to things that the non-hoarder would regard as garbage. "Hoarding is of interest to me because it is one site where the appearance of the call of things seems particularly insistent, and I've turned to hoarders for help in the admittedly paradoxical task of trying to enunciate the nonlinguistic expressivity of things." (Bennett, 2012, p. 267). To gain knowledge about how *thing-power* operates, she puts the hoard in front of the hoarder. By bracketing¹⁰ the psychopathology, in this case setting aside that we know that hoarding is a disorder and that people really suffer from it, she explores what the hoarder's self reported relationship with her things can tell us about the things themselves, the power issuing from them, and how that power operates. Through many encounters with hoards and their hoarders, Bennett identifies three qualities of *thing-power* that operate in the hoard-hoarder assemblage:

3.8.1. *Slowness*

"One way to explain the ability of paper, plastic, wood, stone, glass to "overwhelm" humans is in terms of their comparative advantage over human flesh when it comes to endurance, patience, waiting it out. This is the first of the insights about thing-power made possible by a close encounter with various hoards. It concerns the "speed" of the thing, the relative slowness of its rate of change." (Bennett, 2012, p. 252) Therapists identify (and Bennett agrees) hoarding as a coping response to human mortality as they observe that hoarding is often triggered by loss, such as the death of a parent, a child, the end of a marriage or even an empty nest. So the hoarder clings onto things because things

¹⁰ Epoché, or Bracketing in phenomenological research, is described as a process involved in blocking biases and assumptions in order to explain a phenomenon in terms of its own inherent system of meaning.

last longer: “Their relatively slow rate of decay presents the reassuring illusion that at least something doesn’t die... If the volume of the hoard is large enough, it can provide a veritable cocoon of matter” (Bennett, 2012, p. 253). Bennett’s hypothesis is that “the slowness of objects is preferred to the faster and more visible rate of decay that characterizes human bodies and relationships” and identifies this slowness as a feature of thing-power.

3.8.2. *Porosity and contagion*

“Thing-power works by exploiting a certain porosity that is intrinsic to any material body, be it fleshy, metallic, plastic, etc.” Invoking the Spinozist monism¹¹ which *vital materiality* relies on, Bennett alludes to Spinoza’s account of bodies’ inherent nature to be “susceptible to infusion / invasion / collaboration by or with other bodies... Bodies are essentially intercorporeal. This applies to the hoarded object as well as to the hoarder’s body: each bears the imprints of the others” (Bennett, 2012, pp. 254-258). Bennett exemplifies how the hoarders identify the things they live surrounded by as pieces of the self rather than possessions: A woman can’t imagine getting rid of decades of daily videotaped TV shows, as they are *a part of her*. A hoarder’s friend explains that for her friend, discarding food that has been rotting in the fridge is like *removing layers of her skin*. “The hoarded object is like one’s arm, not a tool but an organ, a vital member.” Emphasising on bracketing the psychopathology Bennett points out that while “a therapeutic discourse would say that hoarders have lost the ability to distinguish between person and thing. A vibrant materialist would say that hoarders have an exceptional awareness of the extent to which all bodies can intertwine, infuse, ally, undermine, and compete with those in its vicinity” (Bennett, 2012, pp. 254-258). To sum up, given both human and non-human bodies’ permeable nature (porosity), by proximity, both hoarded and hoarder are infused by each other in such way that each bears the imprint of each other (contagion).

¹¹ Spinozism is the monist philosophical system of Baruch Spinoza that defines "God" as a singular self-subsistent substance, with both matter and thought being attributes of such. Monism is an opposing view to mind-body dualism.

3.8.3. *Inorganic Sympathy*

Bennett alludes to a relationship between hoard and hoarder that won't let define itself neither by utility nor by aesthetics but rather by a sort of *sympathy* between the inorganic within things and the inorganic within the hoarder. This idea is easier to grasp if we remember that Bennett accounts for the human as a thing-power herself by addressing her own thingness. The human body is a collaboration of organic and inorganic matter both on the inside and the outside. We are made of flesh, but also mineral (bones, teeth and nails), there's iron in our blood; there is electricity in our brains. On the outside we are also collaboratively integrated with the non-human: technology that enhances our abilities, glasses, prosthetics, etc. So, "In an act of sympathy and self-recognition, the hoard accesses the it-stuff within the hoarder herself and forms bonds therein." (Bennett, 2012, pp. 258-263) In other words: the inorganic *stuff* within the hoarder's things seeks and bonds with the inorganic *stuff* within the hoarder.

3.8.4. Summing up the three qualities

These three qualities of *thing-power* sparked a rich imagery that allowed me to imagine, in a visual and poetic way, what it is that the materials I've been painfully collecting do to me. I say *painfully* because collecting daily items that are disposable felt a lot like hoarding, and hoarding is a problem that has touched me closely. Reading about how thing-power operates activated a series of "what ifs" that led me to realise that I saw those marks on paper as my own. Is the slowness of paper reminding me of the permanence of my marks? Or does the tea left on the tea bag reach out to the tea within me and perform some kind of developing process that reveals my inner marks? Are the tea bags and I so infused together that we now bear the imprints of each other? Is ink also infused with my properties? Is the burnt parchment paper timelessly reaching out to the burnt stuff on my now regenerated skin? These thoughts about the inside and the outside of the body made me think of something one can wear. Identifying my skin as the limit of my body with the outside, I perceived it as dishonest in it that it managed to hide my marks. Out of a wish that my marks had been more visible, but also out of a wish that I had a "thicker skin" to protect myself with, I thought of a garment that could act as a second layer of skin, a more honest one. Until that point I had only been able to talk about my experience with the materials in terms of feelings. But now Bennett's language provided me with a

vocabulary that not only helped me explain how I saw those marks as mine, but it also helped me take the focus away from my subjectivity and back to the materials.

Chapter 4. Method

4.1. Method and methodology

Method refers to the specific tools we use to approach research. It has to do with how we acquire knowledge about our research subject. In the case of qualitative research some of the usual methods are surveys, observations and analysis. Methodology has to do with the philosophical and theoretical framework that justifies those methods. In short *method* answers the *how* aspect of the research while *methodology* answers the *why* of those methods.

This thesis is proposed in terms of qualitative research, or at least that is what is required: we (fine art master students at UiA) are expected to formulate a research question, connect that problem to a certain theory, conduct our research through our practice addressing our methods and then communicate the research findings in writing. As a crafter and visual artist, I find this very problematic. This structure supposes that I know beforehand what I want to find out with my creative work and that is usually not my case. But more importantly, as I am positioning my work within a posthuman neo-materialistic perspective, which is a human decentered approach, I feel that qualitative research methods (like observation, data collection and analysis) are inadequate because they rely on human subjectivity. That is why I find it useful to talk about methodologies first: because drawing on methodologies will allow me to position myself outside of the qualitative research model and dispense me from borrowing established methods to ultimately, allow me to invent my own if necessary.

4.2. Posthumanist and neo-materialist methodologies

There is a plurality of posthumanisms, some mainstream and some academic, that do not account for the same ideas. Even within the academic field of the humanities there are many posthuman standpoints that don't necessarily agree with each other. Taking in account the plurality and the amount of knowledge emerging from posthuman thought, scholar Rosi Braidotti focuses on the commonalities and proposes the foundation of the Critical posthumanities that, based at the convergence of posthumanism and post-

anthropocentrism, “no longer assumes the knowing subject as *homo universalis*¹² or *anthropos*¹³, but that [it?] is relational, embodied, embedded and interconnected in a web of human and non-human agents” (Braidotti, 2019, p. 31). This is significant because “as humans are decentered as the only possible knowers, a wealth of research possibilities emerge... (admitting) for other forms/things/objects/beings/phenomenon to know” (Ulmer, 2017). The consequence of departing from human-centered research is that traditional qualitative research methods like interviews, observations, and texts are no longer enough to produce knowledge. “In moving away from empirical models of science that seek to determine causality, reliability, and validity, posthuman knowledges move toward material ways of thinking and being ... Posthuman research produces situated, material, interconnected, processual, and affirmative knowledges” (Ulmer, 2017).

New materialism and Critical posthumanism are intrinsically related. In fact, the critique of anthropocentrism and the humanist ideal is usually performed through neo-materialistic perspectives, because regarding matter as agential (as opposed to passive) necessarily implies a human decentered view. Both scholars I’m mostly referring to, Jane Bennett and Rosi Braidotti, are critical posthuman-feminist neo-materialist thinkers. Braidotti addresses new materialism’s ability to offer tools that can contribute to the task of renewing the Humanities (Braidotti 2013, p. 145). Bennett argues that political theory needs to do a better job of recognising the active participation of nonhuman forces in events, and she does so from a neo-materialistic perspective. In that sense, new materialism can count as a method for the critical posthumanities in its own right: “a method, a conceptual frame and a political stand, which refuses the linguistic paradigm, stressing instead the concrete yet complex materiality of bodies immersed in social relations of power” (Dolphijn/Van der Tuin 2012, p. 21).

Research conducted within a posthuman new-materialist framework is human-decentered and calls for different methods than the ones offered by the qualitative model. It encourages new ways of thinking (see a list of thinking without, thinking with and thinking differently by Ulmer, 2017, p. 10-11). But most importantly it allows knowledge

¹² From Latin: *homo universalis*, "universal man", is an individual whose knowledge spans a substantial number of subjects. But I think Braidotti is referring more specifically to these values incarnated in the figure of the white heterosexual man.

¹³ Greek for "human".

to be produced outside of human subjectivity: water can know, stones, things and storms can know and in my case, tea bags, parchment paper and ink traces can know. So, although I'm addressing the posthuman neo-materialistic nature of my process, I wouldn't exactly call posthumanism and new materialism as my methods. They are rather the theoretical space in which my work took place.

4.3. Artistic research methodologies

When it comes to research in the arts there is also a multiplicity of methodologies like Arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2011) (Leavy, 2016), Practice-led research (Smith & Dean, 2009), Practice-as research (Barrett & Bolt, 2007) (Nelson, 2013) or Artistic research (Varto, 2018), to name a few. Although there are differences between them, they all have the artistic or creative work as a common denominator, and where they might differ is in what kind of knowledge they might produce. I will not go into much detail, but at the risk of oversimplifying I will make the following distinction: in arts-based research, the creative artefact aims to contribute to knowledge (often in other fields), practice-led research aims to offer new understandings about the practice itself (Candy, 2006) while in art/practice-as or artistic research it is the artist's unique experience and reflection that is conveyed (Malterud, 2012). This third category, practice-as or artistic research, tends to see art practice as capable of producing knowledge in its own right and therefore allows for creative ways of sharing the insights like video essays, as opposed to a metrically determined written submissions. It is also sensitive to starting points, as "many practice-led researchers do not commence a research project with a sense of *a problem*. Indeed, they may be led by what is best described as an *enthusiasm of practice*" (Haseman, 2006). Intention-wise I would like to place myself in this third category (Practice-as or artistic research) since the aim of this thesis is to convey my own experience and insights. Although in Norway Artistic research is an established concept in higher education, the research model only applies to PhD program(me)s. A master thesis like this one still responds, to a high degree, to qualitative research models in it that it is expected to communicate the insights in writing of a certain length and respond to a certain structure. So, why am I talking about Artistic research, then? Well, on the one hand, because the way I've worked responds better to the artistic research model than qualitative research model. On the other hand, because I'm positioning my inquiry within the theoretical

framework of new materialism, and therefore qualitative research methods fall short to account for human decentered knowledge production.

4.4. Method

When it comes to addressing my method, my main obstacle lies in the fact that I didn't start from a research question, but rather in response to a call issued from my materials. In that sense my process has been organic and intuitive, but also chaotic, which is the opposite of methodical. Although this attentiveness to the materials implies a neo-materialistic view, I cannot really say that I have approached the work methodologically from that perspective, or at least not deliberately. Bennett, for example, makes her vital materialist approach very clear when exploring the concept of thing-power through the hoarders: her first premise is to focus on the things themselves and whenever an all-too-humanised view of the thing attempts to emerge, she reminds herself to focus on the thing, not the human. (Bennett, 2012, p. 261) This was not my case. I also recognise that neither naming the specific steps that I followed nor the techniques that I used will really say much about how new insights were produced. So, what I have chosen to do is to look back at my process and try to theorise what it is that I've been doing.

4.4.1. Affective mark finding

If I had to conceptualise what I've been doing by looking back at my process, I would say that I have been engaging affectively with some marks on papers. I have mentioned how my process started with intuitively collecting tea bags and parchment papers. This was intuitive in that I couldn't identify what I saw in them, nor was I collecting them out of a sense of purpose. I knew that my interest in these materials lay on their marks, out of an interest in mark making, but at the same time I was acknowledging a certain agency stemming from them. Throughout the process new marks emerged. It wasn't until I put together all three sets of marks that I realized that I was identifying myself with them, that I saw those marks on paper as my own. At that moment I identified a shift from mark making to mark finding.

In the process chapter, I locate the moments in which new understandings emerged, not out of interpretation but out of affect. Affect considered in the Deleuzo-Guattrian way, as

a prepersonal exchange of intensities between bodies (of any kind). When I refer to a call of the materials and acknowledge their agentic capacities, I'm also locating an affect produced out of the encounter between the materials and me. This affect is something that can be traced throughout the whole process; it can be mapped. So, having identified a shift from mark making to mark finding, and being able to map the affects throughout my process, I will here propose a name for my method by calling it *affective mark finding*.

4.5. Ethical considerations

I decided to take away the focus from the trauma itself, as describing it in detail would lead to the identification of others. Instead of focusing on what caused the trauma then, I focus on my side of the experience. This might sound elusive at times but it is also appropriate since my focus is on the material's agentic capacities of informing the process. Occasionally I refer to other people under the process chapter, but I do it in a way that they cannot be identified. Otherwise, I have done my best to make sure that artworks and photos are properly credited and quotes cited. Photos of the process are taken by me and therefore unaccredited.

Chapter 5. Process

5.1. Introduction

Personal processes are multi-layered and complex. As I mentioned in the introduction, this project started with a big amount of intuition. For a long period of time, I just collected material and tried to understand what it was that it was telling me. I basically collected used tea bags and used parchment paper out of an interest in the traces on them. It wasn't until later in the process that I understood that I was collecting marks that I recognized as my own. One of the problems I often find when writing about my process is that the structure of a written thesis imposes a sequential order that the process itself does not have. It makes it look like I did this first, then that, and later that other thing. It is difficult for me to look back at this process in a timeline as many parts of the process occurred simultaneously. I also find it especially challenging to write about this process in general as I'm saying that it is about how the materials informed the process of identifying trauma. Therefore, what I'm trying to do here is describe my experience with the materials at the same time that I try to map those moments in which some kind of knowledge was produced, not out of interpretation but out of affect. For that purpose, instead of narrating the steps of this process chronologically, I will organise them according to the materials, which for the sake of clarity I will call series.

5.2. Theoretical and methodological perspectives

Since the focus of this chapter is to address material's agentic capacities to produce knowledge I find it useful here to use the concepts of *actant*, *assemblage* and *affect*. The same way Bennett applies the notion of *assemblage* to the blackout, I see it relevant here to apply it to my process. So, I will identify my materials as *actants* in an assemblage whose emergent agency is the one of evoking trauma. And I will do this by mapping the moments in which new knowledge emerged from the encounter with the materials, not out of interpretation but out of *affect*. I will call this *affect mapping*, and I'm proposing it as an analytic tool of the process.

I will also use Bennett's three properties of *thing-power* to describe the agency of my materials: *slowness*, *porosity and contagion*, and *inorganic sympathy*. The main repercussion of these concepts in my process is that they activated my materials in a

visual-poetic way, which gave rise to the idea of the final piece. I see these concepts as an entry point to the creative dimension, not as principles that need to be proved by the work. As a consequence, I do not necessarily trace a correspondence between each individual *thing-power* and my materials, nor do I expect the artwork to do the same. It is the poetic dimension I'm interested on.

5.3. The teabag series:

From object to subject and from plaster to wound

The teabags come from my early works on abstract calligraphy, so I was already in the habit of collecting them. What I was after was the traces on the paper left by the tea, so I collected only the one specific type that left the most defined traces. After making tea I would save the teabags, let them dry, empty them and store the paper for later use. I used the traced paper from the teabags to add layers in a visual composition or to give an aged look to the surface of the paper sheet. Then during my BA project the teabags entered a new dimension, one of meaning. I was looking for my own visual language through experimentation with calligraphy, mark making and embroidery. As I identified that an excess of control in the use of the tools was what produced mistakes, I saw those mistakes as a wound in the composition. Then the teabags and the embroidery stepped in to emend those wounds. The teabags were secured to the piece with cross-stitch embroidery, which ended up adding a new textual element¹⁴ to the abstract calligraphy piece. These new textual elements were seen as an alternate narrative to those wounds and in these pieces the teabags acquired the function of providing care. As a gesture (to my paper-self) the



Figure 3: Process of recycling tea bags.

¹⁴ Referring to what in calligraphy and typography is known as the "x" height, which is the measure for the height of lower case letters.

teabags gently covered the wounds without hiding them while they offered an alternative to dealing with the wound other than control: a new story. Looking back at that moment, two realizations come to my mind: One, that I was already in the process of identifying trauma, and two, that I already then saw paper as an extension of my body.

What happened later with the teabags was that, as life got busy, I couldn't keep up with the process of emptying them and they started to pile up. And as they piled up I started seeing them as something else rather than just teabags drying out, or in Jane Bennett's language they started to exhibit their *thing-power*. I felt for them and simultaneously they disgusted me. The look of the growing pile was somehow unsettling. Instead of rushing out to empty them and store them away, I decided to let the pile grow. I tried to explore my relationship with the teabags through photography without much success. The photos reinforced the feeling that the teabags wanted something from me, but I still didn't know what to do with them. At that point, making myself a cup of tea became a daily performance:

As the water reaches the boiling point the kettle turns so noisy that the girls complain about it because they can't hear the cartoons. Then the kettle stops with a click. I stretch myself with some difficulty to reach out to the shelf where the cups are stored. I pick a cup but I don't fill it in case I get delayed and I need to boil the water again, because the water needs to be boiling. Then I take down the yellow box of tea. (A while ago I decided to stop buying items at those fancy teashops when I travel; those cute Chinese tins end up sitting in the cupboard taking up space for years as I always choose the same two flavours: the yellow one and the black and orange one.) The teabags come individually packed, how wasteful... I should either drink the fancy tea or give it away. I peel off the wrap and place the teabag in the empty cup before I make the water boil again. Then I pour the boiling water right on top of the teabag and as the cup fills up the bag floats up to the surface. I let it brew for five minutes. I have to set the alarm or otherwise I can get caught up in something else. But I don't. I usually come back to it before the alarm beeps. I pick up the tea bag with a spoon and holding the thread by the tag I wrap it twice around the bag and spoon pressing to drain out the remaining tea. After unwrapping it I lift it by the tag and carefully place it on a saucer, hidden in the corner of the kitchen counter, where other tea bags are drying. I try to avoid contact with the other bags and I do my best to leave it standing. After a couple of days, if the teabag is dry, I move it to the pile.

The pile kept growing and adding to the messiness of our kitchen landscape and when it was too big or too disturbing to look at, I would pack it and move it away to another place of the house. Then a new pile would start grow again. A few *crops* were spoiled: some grew mould, some suffered accidents. Similarly to what Bennett describes through her encounter with the garbage assemblage, the pile would insist on existing in abundance to



Figure 4: Tea bags drying.

my own intentions, it claimed existence in its own thing-right. This is also similar to what hoarders report about their hoard; it has a life of its own. But differently to the hoarder, I was defining the tea bags as my material (or were they defining themselves?); I just didn't know how to use them yet. It wasn't until later that they entered a symbolic dimension. In the context of this embodied approach to therapy that I mentioned before, I was asked to put an image to what is holding me back. This image popped up in my head:

I'm wearing nothing but a long coat. Hanging from it, hundreds of used tea bags spread behind me like the train of a wedding dress. It's hard to move with all those tea bags hanging from me, but I do it any way. Bending forward in a straight line, I move as if I tried to walk against a gale. And the tea bags have no choice but to follow me.

I could have interpreted this image as the difficulty I was going through in the process of making my project. But because of the context in which this image emerged, I knew it had to do with my personal history. The tea bags were talking to me about a heavy load I was carrying with me and later I was able to identify that load as trauma. Reading the



Figure 5: Pile of tea bags exhibiting their *thing-power*.

way I write about how I make a cup of tea, it is also possible that I saw the tea bags as my body. So in the course of the two works, my BA project and my MFA project, the symbolism of the tea bags had migrated from object to subject, from the patch on the wound to the wound itself, to the wounded herself. I associate the tea bags with two of Bennett's thing-powers. On the one hand, porosity and contagion: by proximity and repetition of a daily performance, the qualities of the tea-bag-thing find their way through my pores and into me and I become in some way colonized by the tea bag. And, reciprocally, have some of my qualities colonized the tea bag in such way that I see the thing as an extension of myself? Am I made of tea bag and are tea bags made of me? Or is it inorganic sympathy? Is the tea left in the tea bags acting as the chemical agent used in photo developing? In an act of self-recognition and sympathy the tea left in the tea bag reaches out to the tea I drank and develops an image of something that is inside of me. These associations came much later in the process when putting together the three series and after reading Jane Bennet's *Vibrant matter* and *Powers of the hoard*. Bennett aside, what I can say about this part of the process is that it has to do with acknowledging trauma and that it's strongly informed by the tea bags.

I will let the tea bags rest for now and come back to them later when I talk about my attempt to put them in action by experimenting with ink. But first I want to direct my attention to the next actant: the parchment paper sheets.



Figure 6: Tea bag recycling process.

5.3.1. The parchment paper series: traces as physical evidence

Physical evidence (also called real evidence or material evidence) is any material object that plays some role in the matter that gave rise to the litigation, introduced as evidence (...) to prove a fact in issue based on the object's physical characteristics. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Real_evidence)



Figure 7: First piece of the parchment paper series.

While I was saving used tea bags, I was collecting images of parchment paper after baking. The series started with the letter-like burn marks piece by the time I was working on abstract calligraphic pieces for my BA project. Although in an abstract way, I was working with text. After a busy child's birthday party at home, I found in the oven the parchment baking-sheet where I had baked several rounds of hot dogs. The burn marks that they had left on the parchment paper looked like text and in the rush of cleaning I found myself literally trying to read it. At the time it seemed obvious to me that, as my focus was on calligraphy and mark making, some marks that looked like text caught my attention. I took a picture of it and didn't think about it much longer. But a few months later I found myself taking pictures of new parchment paper sheets. At first I would photograph those revealing text or texture-like patterns, but soon I took an interest on any kind of marks left on them. As someone who is interested in mark making as an aesthetic practice, I didn't pay too much attention to why I was collecting these images. But as I started taking an interest in the less aesthetically pleasant marks, I perceived myself as a

detective analysing the traces from a crime scene. These photos have been taken over the course of almost three years and serve as a sort of visual journal. Much later in the process and already imbued with Bennett's new materialistic perspectives a memory came to my mind while looking at one of these parchment sheets:

When I was very little I got scalded with hot milk. It was an accident at the kindergarten: the cook was sick one day so someone else prepared the snack and we were served milk that was literally just boiled. The whole cup landed on my lap and they had to take me to the hospital. The most traumatic part was the treatment. The wound on my thigh had to be treated with ointment infused bandages, whose smell I can still remember. The cure consisted in washing the wound in between changing bandages and it was so painful. For over ten years I had a brown spot the size of my hand on my right thigh that reminded me of the incident. But as I grew up the scar grew with me and its colour turned lighter. I remember now that at times it would disappear and reappear later. Eventually it disappeared completely and I forgot, also completely.

It was a quite traumatic incident, yet I had completely forgotten about it. Or even worse: I had remembered it only to completely erase it from my memory again. As I perceived myself recalling this event in front of the burnt parchment paper, I thought about Bennett's thing-powers again. Is it possible that by the principle of inorganic sympathy the burnt stuff in the paper timelessly seeks and evokes the burnt stuff in my skin? Or is it that the slowness of the paper reminds me of the permanence of the scars? The parchment paper may last longer than my skin and thus prevent me from forgetting again. At the time this memory appeared I had already addressed my trauma and I was dealing with some of the aspects of it. Verbal abuse was one of them. Verbal abuse can be very painful, it has an effect on the body; yet it leaves no visible scars. It can be denied, it can be concealed; the abused has no evidence. Another effect of verbal abuse is a big amount of self-doubt.

The trace is the only proof we have that an action took place. So it's the truth par excellence. We are beyond any symbolic system, beyond a system of positions between signifier and signified. We are in the truth of action.

(Barbara Glowczewski in Melitopoulos & Lazzarato, 2012)

In contrast to my invisible marks the traces on the parchment papers were offering a huge amount of information about what happened to them: the shape and size of what was baked, how long they were exposed to heat and what surface they were resting on. They

offered proof. I saw the parchment papers as truth-bearing pieces of physical evidence, the kind of proof that I lacked.

Figure 8 (Next page): 45 parchment papers ►



5.3.2. Ink series: The problem with words

As I was approaching ten years of living in Norway, I was physically on the brink of collapse, and although life was stable, I had a feeling of constant unease. A medical assessment led me to an embodied approach to cognitive therapy and after a few consults the word trauma came up for the first time in relation to my personal history. As an Argentine I have years of experience with Lacanian psychoanalysis, which basically relies on language, yet the word trauma had never come up. I was very surprised that approaching therapy through the body had such rapid effects. In that sense I feel that language had failed to access a knowledge that was embodied: my body knew I was bearing marks, but words had not been able to address them. A trip to Argentina in between semesters put me in direct contact with the materiality of my trauma. Attuned with this new attentiveness to matter, the trauma had become so evident, so palpable that no amount of words could hide it. Identifying myself as trauma-bearing allowed me to look at my own history through a different lens. So when I resumed my work with the project, I felt that I wanted to connect the tea bags with my calligraphy practice. I picked up on the image of the tea bags hanging from me, as I realized that I had identified the tea bags as the trauma itself or as the bodily effects of bearing it. Elaborating on that idea I imagined turning myself into a writing tool in a performance. The image is the same as before:

I'm wearing a coat from which hundreds of tea bags hang and pile up on the floor, but now the floor of the room is covered with paper. There are buckets of ink randomly placed around the room. I dip the tea bags in the ink and slowly start walking towards the next bucket. As I move the inked tea bags leave a trail after me.

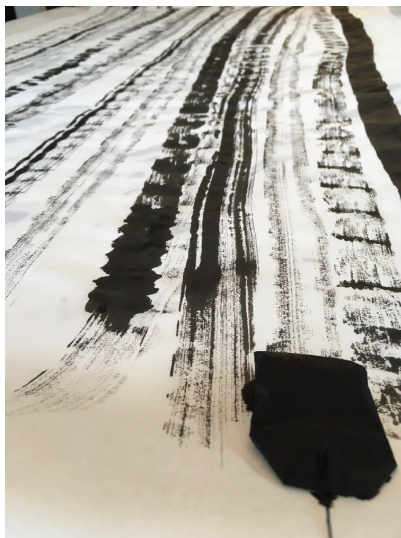


Figure 9: Mark making with tea bags.

The idea behind this performance was that when the body bears a trauma but the trauma is not addressed, everything you do becomes tainted by it. So I decided to try this idea at home by testing what kind of traces an inked tea bag can leave. The traces left by the tea bag were not aesthetically appealing to me, but the inked tea bag resting on a small ceramic bowl became representative of many unpleasant situations that happened around a cup of tea. In contact with ink and paper I felt the need to write. In the light of trauma many painful memories became re-signified: words had been used as weapons and to justify the unjustifiable, to demand the impossible. From this perspective it became clear to me that there was a lack of correlation between the words used to describe the reality and reality itself. So I wrote about these memories and the rice paper roll that I wrote on started to accumulate at the table's feet. The image of these stories flowing from the table and sort of inundating the room together with the black tea bag was interesting enough for me: somebody had been served a toxic tea and now these memories were flowing out of the drinker and on to the paper, becoming alive and taking up space in the room. Would they ever stop? But what was also interesting to me was the pattern made by the traces of ink left on the guard sheet under the rice paper, the one I use to protect the table in case some ink goes through. As if by writing down those memories I was performing them, the only thing left was the imprint of their experiential meaning. An imprint that, detached from language, would reject any wrongfully assigned signification by words.



Figure 10: Calligraphy with ruling pen

Earlier during the MFA course I had expressed my discomfort with writing about my process. I was afraid that the pressure to justify the artwork with words would produce an interpretation out of something that is not really there. I also presented my abstract calligraphic work while identifying abstraction and deconstruction as strategies to avoid being read, because the things I wrote about were too personal. Later in the process I realised that those were survival strategies: out of a self-preserving desire I had developed a habit of inarticulation. By putting my narratives in very abstract terms I omitted the details that could have made it easier to identify the problem. In that sense I feel that language had failed me. So to me the main contribution of this calligraphic attempt was first, that it enabled to locate a gap that exists between words and facts in my personal history, and second, to identify my role in concealing as a survival strategy. This made me realise that my subjective position is built up on a survival strategy, and for that reason everything I do is in response to that trauma. The consequence of this realisation has a huge impact on my personal life: realising that the events that caused me to be traumatised have no longer scope in my present life, I can abandon my survival strategy and therefore rebuild my subjectivity from a different place.



Figure 11: Ink marks left on the guard sheet.

5.4. From mark making to mark finding

The way I'm writing it sounds as if I first identified the tea bags with trauma and its bodily effects, then the parchment papers with the visibility of those marks as proof of truth, and later with the ink addressed language's role in distracting from reality. But it wasn't until I was looking at all the pieces of the process together that I realized that I was talking about marks. I knew I was collecting marks from an aesthetic point of view since mark making is one of my areas of interest. But until then I didn't realise that I was talking about my marks. I was seeing paper as an extension of my skin and the traces on it as the very materiality of my own marks. Looking back at my practice where I used mark making as part of my visual language, I now identify a shift from mark making to mark finding. I was no longer producing the marks myself, but I was finding them on materials such as paper and identifying them as mine.

5.5. The final product: an honest skin

It was Jane Bennett's concept of thing-power that gave form to the idea of a garment capable of revealing the wearer's marks. The qualities of thing-power that she describes, visually respond to my research question: How are these marks on paper informing me about my own? In other words: how is it that these marks are mine? Are the tea bags, by virtue of porosity and contagion, impregnated with my own qualities? Is the burnt matter on the parchment paper by inorganic sympathy timelessly evoking the burnt matter of my skin? Is the slowness of paper advocating for the permanence of those marks, which will stay there until I acknowledge them?

Time is also an important aspect of this process that stretched over the span of three years and in between two locations. I had to take a break from the project due to the Covid-19 situation, but the internal processes continued and had more time to mature. So, at the time of resuming the work, my focus had shifted from the painful experiences themselves to a desire of moving on. Having identified paper as my skin, and the skin as the outer layer of my body, I perceived it as somehow dishonest since it was able to conceal the marks under it. The tea bags were the material that reminded me the most of skin properties. They also carry a similar connotation from my previous work where I used them as a bandage. A bandage that, though care-providing, was so thin and translucent

that it allowed the scar to be seen. The thoughts about the inside and the outside of the body mediated by the skin make me think of it as something that is worn. Parting from a desire that my marks had been more visible but also from the wish that I had a “thicker skin” to protect myself, I imagined a long cardigan that could work as a new layer of skin, a more honest one. As if by virtue of porosity and contagion the garment was able to perform a process similar to photo developing: when worn, it would reveal the wearer's marks. The wearer then would be able to observe her own marks, acknowledge them and take them off. As I just pointed out, the tea bags reminded me of the properties of skin, so I chose to use them for the construction of the garment. Since the tea bags are already impregnated with my own marks, the finished piece would show the honest skin after its job is done.



Figure 12: Sketches for the final piece.

5.5.1. The making

Moving from visual to textile expressions feels like a natural direction to take since I'm addressing the embodied nature of my marks. The construction of the piece is very intuitive. From the experience in handling the tea bags as a working material I knew they would resist being sewn together with a sewing machine. So once I had drawn a sketch of the piece, I had a good idea of what I wanted it to look like. My idea was to make five large units of fabric for the pattern by sewing together the individual empty tea bags. I'm

sewing them first in stripes and then connecting each stripe with each other by the sides. As I mentioned before, I arrived at this idea quite late in the process so I'm still working on the assembly of the piece. So far I've been making the material ready by emptying the tea bags and testing different qualities of fabric. When I open the tea bags, the paper is wrinkled in the areas that held the most liquid, so I have the option of leaving them like that or pressing them with an iron. The tea bags have a right side and a wrong side too: the right side is the outer side where the marks are more visible. I can sew the pieces together by overlapping them with the right side up leaving the seam visible or place both right sides facing each other so that the seam stays in the back. I made three samples to get an impression of how the piece is going to feel like: one leaving the tea bags wrinkled and the seam on the front, one with iron-pressed tea bags and the seam on the back, and the last one with wrinkled tea bags and the seam on the back. I chose the third one because the crispy texture of the wrinkled paper makes the fabric look more alive. Also, I don't want the seam to be visible because the thread adds a new element to the piece. If any threads are visible, it should be the threads from the tea bags, but I ruled that out since I'm specifically focusing on the agentic capacities of the traces. The crispiness of



Figure 13: Strips of recycled tea bag paper sewn together.

the wrinkles also helps the fabric hold a certain volume, which is desirable for exhibition purposes. My idea is for the piece to stand for itself at the viewer's height, either by hanging it from the ceiling or by placing it onto a custom made "T"-shaped support. I would like for the piece to hold a certain volume, as if it was being worn.

5.6. On a positive note

Since the work is not finished an analysis is not possible. But I can speculate a bit about what it's going to look and feel like. As one enters the white room, a beige brownish coat-like artefact can be seen from a distance. It stands at the same height of the viewer in a way that makes it look as if someone was wearing it, so from far it could be taken for a person. As one comes closer to it, its materiality is revealed: it is made of the paper of used tea bags. It is thin and translucent to a certain degree, but the traces on the tea bags grant it some opacity. The absence of the wearer reinforces her presence and hopefully will inspire some curiosity about her identity or her whereabouts. Hopefully the piece will also inspire some curiosity about its current state: did something happen to it or was it always like that? By placing it at the wearer's height, I hope to create a sense of empathy as the viewer could see herself wearing it or swapping places with it. But as I mentioned earlier, although this piece is the materialisation of a process that has to do with trauma, I don't expect the artwork to convey a sense of it. On the contrary, the piece is embedded with a sense of hope and relief: as the marks migrate from the body to the coat, the wearer no longer carries them within. As they are now visible, one can acknowledge them and decide what to do with them, like for example, call them art. I hope the materiality of the piece is powerful enough to engage the spectator affectively rather than from a place of interpretation.



Figure 14: Seam on the front, not pressed.



Figure 28: Seam on the back, iron pressed.



Figure 29: Seam on the back, not pressed (selected fabric quality).

Chapter 6. Conclusion

6.1. Back to the research questions

This process started out with a large amount of intuition. With a sense of what Jane Bennett would call *the call of things*, I started collecting used tea bags and used parchment papers out of an interest in their marks. Further experimentation with ink produced new marks that also caught my attention. Along the process, issues related to a personal trauma began to emerge, which made me recognize those marks on paper as mine. So having realised that I identified with those marks, I was able to formulate the research questions:

RQ1: How are the marks on recycled tea bags, parchment paper and guard-sheets informing me about my own marks?

RQ2: What kind of approach to the creative work could unleash the knowledge-producing potential in the artist's materials?

The answers to both questions converge in the development of a term to address a neo-materialistic methodological approach: *affective mark finding*. By engaging affectively with those marks, they exhibited their *thing-powers*: porosity and contagion, inorganic sympathy, and slowness (Bennett, 2012). By porosity and contagion, the tea bags and I are infused together and carry the imprints of each other. By inorganic sympathy, the burnt parchment paper seeks and bonds with my burnt skin. And the slowness of the paper ensures that my marks will not be forgotten or ignored.

6.2. Summary of insights

6.2.1. Theoretical and methodological insights

Theory became of great relevance in this process. In *Critical Posthumanism and New materialism* I found a solid theoretical platform for both my views and the way I approach creative work.

When I became acquainted with Bennett's theory, I was already deep in the process and I had already activated my materials in a visual-poetic way. But before then I had only been able to describe my experience with the materials in terms of feelings, which took the focus away from the materials and back to my subjectivity. Then Bennett's insights about thing-power provided me with a vocabulary that allowed me to explain my experience in terms of (vibrant) materiality, and in consequence, to move the focus away from my subjectivity and back to the materials. Until now I had been very resilient to justify artistic work through theory. Now, having found a theoretical framework that feels friendlier to my experience of art, I feel a bit more comfortable in using it. Yet, I still find it problematic to describe the artistic process verbally through the writing of a thesis.

The biggest theoretical insight produced by this work is that it introduced Critical Posthumanism and new materialism to me. Both theoretical perspectives resonate with me and will most likely continue to be present in my future work. The second insight is that contrary to my belief, when relevant, theory can contribute greatly to the artistic process.

The two main findings of this work are the development of the concepts of *affective mapping* and *affective mark finding*. The former as an analytic tool for the addressing the production of meaning, and the latter as an approach to the materials and the creative work itself.

6.2.2. Practice-related insights

In the introduction chapter I proposed that this work could be a continuation of the work I had done for my bachelor's thesis. So I want to draw here on the differences and similarities between both works, and see if there is, in fact, continuity.

Both theses are project-based and focus on the creative process. My BA project had a starting point at the techniques (calligraphy and embroidery) and their materials (paper, ink and thread) and the process was oriented to finding my own unique expression. My MFA project had a starting point at the materials alone (tea bags and parchment papers) and the process was an open-ended exploration of their materiality without a clear sense of a goal. Both works relied strongly on their processes, and in both cases the process

itself determined the final product. In both cases also, a big amount of personal insight was produced.

| | BA THESIS | | MFA THESIS |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| Focus of thesis | Creative process | = | Creative process |
| Starting point | Technique | → | Material |
| Process relevance | Central | = | Central |
| Methodological approach | Hermeneutic (Interpretation) | → | Neo-materialist (Affect) |
| Theoretical approach | Human-centered (Phenomenology) | → | Human-decentered (Posthumanism/ New materialism) |
| Form | Two-dimensional | → | Three-dimensional |
| Art field | Visual art | → | Textile art |

Figure 15: Comparison between the BA and the MFA projects.

Methodologically, I approached the work on my BA project from a hermeneutic perspective, while the current work uses a neo-materialistic approach and includes a strong affective component. This approach is reflected in the result, an artwork that calls to be experienced by the viewer rather than interpreted. Both processes have a self-organising component: In the BA thesis I address form finding¹⁵ as one of my methods while in this thesis I focus on the notion of assemblage to address the self-organising nature of my process.

Theoretically, both works rely on the embodied experience, although they come from different perspectives. While the BA project takes a human-centered perspective like the phenomenology of perception¹⁶, the MFA relies on human-decentered theoretical approaches like Posthumanism and New materialism.

¹⁵ *Form finding* is a term that describes the experimental process that the German architect and theorist Frei Otto (1925-2015) implemented through his practice. By experimenting with structures of steel wire and soapy water, he was able to find a form that was self-organized by its own physical properties and not designed or determined by him.

¹⁶ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Phenomenology of perception* (1945)

In terms of form and discipline I have moved from the two-dimensional language of calligraphy to the three-dimensional language of textile art, thus moving away from the visual art field, and towards the field of installation art. This movement is a result of shifting the focus from the technique to the materials themselves.

By looking at this comparative table I see many movements and few aspects that stayed the same. But I don't see these movements as differences but rather as natural progressions. In that sense I can say that there is continuity between the two works as I see the MFA work as the maturation of a process that started with the BA project.

6.2.3. Personal insights

Although I identify the personal and the creative aspects of this work as part of the same process, the main contribution to knowledge of this work is on the personal side. Not only have I been able to recognize some trauma related marks, but I have also been able to identify my subjective position as a survival strategy. That realisation enabled the possibility for me to position myself subjectively in a different place. In short, I identified myself as trauma-bearing, I identified that my subjective position is a response to trauma, and, hopefully, I allowed myself to move on and redefine myself outside of it.

6.3. Limitations

Critical Posthumanism and New Materialism might appear oversimplified in this text since giving a full account of them would exceed the scope of this thesis. Yet, they are relevant both for contextualizing Jane Bennett's theory and to give account of my own approach. Although I've done my best to cover the points that are relevant to talk about my work, the overview might look fragmented.

The method chapter posed a challenge for me. On the one hand I needed to distance myself from the qualitative research model, which is why I addressed artistic research methodologies. On the other hand I wanted to address Critical posthumanism and new materialism as ways of producing knowledge without necessarily calling them my methods. As a result I present them both as methodological framework(s), which means

that they constitute the theoretical platform that gives validity to my method. The same applies to artistic research.

Writing about my projects while still working on them is always challenging. This is probably because I don't usually have a research question from the start, as I arrive to it through the process. I also find it difficult to reflect while still immersed in the process and I usually need some distance. This work was so entangled with the messiness and the complexity of personal processes that I could only write about it from a certain distance, and yet in the same messy fashion. In that sense I admit that having a clear idea of a research topic would be very helpful in addressing relevant theories

6.4. Future perspectives

Throughout my personal process, my focus changed from the trauma itself to overcoming it. In correspondence with that shift, I envision a similar movement in my creative work. In moving away from such a subjective position, I will probably approach my future work from a different perspective. I don't think trauma will be present in my work in the future, or at least I don't identify as an artist who works with trauma. This thesis helped me clarify that my interest in the creative work comes from a sensuous experience of the materials. As an artist I have a great need to continue to explore materiality, but I hope to be able to approach my materials in a more pleasurable way. Although I can still see myself working with visual art, I'm leaning more towards textile right now. Paper is still a material of interest to me, but also threads, wool and fabric.

Another aspect that became reinforced through this work is the inquiry element present in my processes. Now I can see myself doing research too. I can see how this newfound interest in theory can help me draw on possible inquiries. As an artist-researcher I'm interested in materiality and its knowledge-producing dimension. This means that I can see myself doing both artistic work and research, but always practice-based and material-based.

Bibliography

- Barone, T. & Eisner, E. (2012). *Arts based research*. Sage.
- Barrett, E. & Bolt, B. (2010). *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*. IB Tauris.
- Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press.
- Bennett, J. (2012). Powers of the Hoard: Further Notes on Material Agency. In Cohen, J. J. (2012). (Ed.). *Animal, Mineral, Vegetable: Ethics and Objects*. Oliphaunt Books.
- Braidotti, R. (2019). A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 36(6), 31–61.
- Braidotti, R. (2019). A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 36(6), 31–61. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418771486>
- Braidotti, R. (2019). *Posthuman knowledge*. Polity press.
- Candy, L. (2006). *Practice Based Research: A Guide*. Creativity & Cognition Studios, University of Technology, Sydney. CCS Report: 2006-V1.0
- Carranza, N. (2018, April 24). Agency. Critical Posthumanism: *Genealogy of the Posthuman*. Retrieved from: <https://criticalposthumanism.net/agency/> - ftm3
- Coole, D. (2013). Agentic Capacities and Capacious Historical Materialism: Thinking with New Materialisms in the Political Sciences. *Millennium - Journal of International Studies*. 41. 451-469
- Coole, D. & Frost, S. (2010). *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Duke University Press.
- Dean, R. & Smith, H. (2009). *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*. Edinburgh University Press
- Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Dolphijn, R. & Van der Tuin, I. (2012) *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*. MPublishing.
- Salcedo, D. (2016). From the Artist. In Schneider Enriquez, M. (2016). *Doris Salcedo: The Materiality of Mourning*. Harvard Art Museums.
- Ferrando, F. (2013). Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations. *Existenz*, 8(2), 1-7. ISSN 1932-1066.
- Haseman, B. (2006). A Manifesto for Performative Research. *Media International Australia*, 118(1), 98–106. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0611800113>
- Herbrechter, S. (2013). *Posthumanism: a critical analysis*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Herbrechter, S. (2017, November 17). Critical Posthumanism. *Critical posthumanism: Genealogy of the Posthuman*. Retrieved from: <https://criticalposthumanism.net/critical-posthumanism/>

- Hird, M. J. (2004). Feminist Matters: New Materialist Considerations of Sexual Difference. *Feminist Theory*, 5(2), 223–232. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700104045411>
- Latour, B. (1996). On actor-network theory: A few clarifications. *Soziale Welt*, 47(4), 369-381. Retrieved from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40878163>
- Leavy, P. (2019). *Handbook of Arts-Based Research*. Guilford Press
- Lemke, Thomas (2015) Varieties of materialism, *BioSocieties* 10(4), 490-495; DOI:10.1057/biosoc.2015.41
- Malterud, N. (2012). Kunstnerisk utviklingsarbeid – nødvendig og utfordrende. *Nordic Journal of Art and Research*, 1(1). Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.7577/information.v1i1.217>
- Melitopoulos, A. & Lazzarato, M. (2012, July). Assemblages: Félix Guattari and Machinic Animism. *E-flux*, 36. Retrieved from: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/36/61259/assemblages-flix-guattari-and-machinic-animism/>
- Nelson, R. (2013). *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sanzo, K. (2018, April 25). New Materialism(s). *Critical Posthumanism: Genealogy of the Posthuman*. Retrieved from: https://criticalposthumanism.net/new-materialisms-2/#_ftnref6
- Sencindiver, S. (2017). New Materialism. *Oxford Bibliographies*. DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780190221911-0016. Retrieved from: <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190221911/obo-9780190221911-0016.xml>
- Ulmer, J.B. (2017) Posthumanism as research methodology: inquiry in the Anthropocene. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 30(9), 832-848, DOI: 10.1080/09518398.2017.1336806
- Varto, J. (2018). *Artistic Research: What is It? Who Does It? Why?* Aalto ARTS Books.
- Wikipedia (2016). *Real evidence*. Retrieved from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Real_evidence

Image sources

Figures 1-4: Own work

Figure 5: Ruth Tabancay. (2012). *Blankie*. [Textile piece]
(<https://www.ruthtabancay.com/work/tea-bags>)

Figure 6: Carien Quiroga. (2009). *Dirty Laundry*. [Installation]
(<https://www.flickr.com/photos/carienquiroya/8022022622/in/photostream/>)

Figure 7: Valeria Burgoa. (2010). *Obra de té*. [Textile object]
(https://www.flickr.com/photos/valeria_burgoa/4784065339/in/album-72157605775742292/)

Figure 8: Kim Schoenberger. (2010). *Cols Cushions*. [Textile object]
(<https://www.kimschoenberger.com/exhibitions/expressions-of-love-2010/?pid=34#gallery/682b7f8ca96c9e4961cd43bfba6d78a/34>)

Figure 9: Doris Salcedo. (1992/2004). *Atrabiliarios (detail)*. [Installation]. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, USA.
(<https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/atrabiliarios/>)

Figure 10: Doris Salcedo. (2008/2010). *Plegaria muda* [Installation]. Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon, Portugal.
(https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/plegaria_muda/)

Figure 11: Doris Salcedo. (2001). Untitled. [Sculpture]. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, USA.
(<https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/untitled-concrete/>)

Figure 12: Doris Salcedo. (1998). *Untitled*. [Sculpture]. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, USA.
(<https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/untitled-concrete/>)

Figure 13: Doris Salcedo. (2007). Untitled. [Sculpture]. Private collection
(<https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/untitled-concrete/>)

Figure 14: Doris Salcedo. (1998). *Untitled*. [Sculpture]. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, USA.
(<https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/untitled-concrete/>)

Figure 15: Doris Salcedo. (2014). *Disremembered I*. [Textile sculpture].
(<https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/disremembered/>)

Figures 16-30: Own work