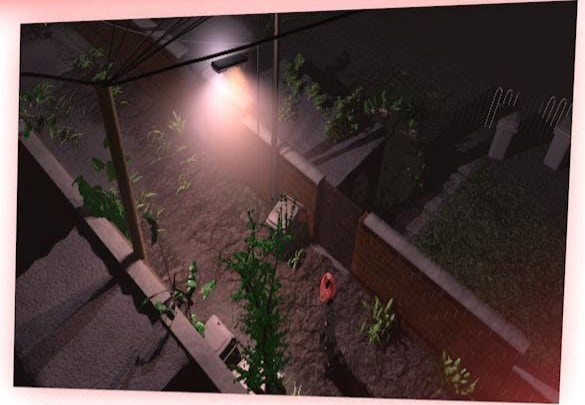


# OBJECT AGENCY



## Thinking with Things



Object Agency and Vibrant Matter

# Agency

- What is agency?
- The ability to act, do, be
- ... & in so doing to affect other beings, things, objects



# Agency and Intentionality

- Enlightenment ontologies assume that agency is the preserve of **rational thinking humans**
- Assumption that agency – the ability to effect change – is somehow synonymous with **intentionality**
- Can we talk then of the agency of things?



# Gell: Art and Agency

- What do (art) objects **do** in their social context?
  - What is their practical mediatory role in social process?
- Asmat shield is more than an aesthetic object:
  - Designed to be **fear-inducing** to opposing warrior
  - It provokes a specific reaction



Asmat shield, Papua  
New Guinea

# Gell: Art and Agency

- “the nature of the art object is a function of the social-relational matrix in which it is embedded” (1998, 7)
- Shield is effective because of what it causes to happen
  - It is a social agent
  - It initiates “causal sequences of a particular type, events caused by acts of mind or will” (1998, 16)
- Therefore, things have agency



Asmat shield, Papua  
New Guinea

# Art and Agency

- Agency applies to any object embedded in a network of social relations
- Gell also interested in how people attribute agency to objects (folk agency)
  - Trobriand islanders explain agency of their canoes as “magic” / enchantment
  - How this affects the kula exchange



Trobriand canoe prow

# Art and Agency

- Art object with agency, such the as nkisi, is “the visible knot which ties together an invisible skein of relations, fanning out in social space & social time” (1998, 98)
- Enchainment / networking



Nkisi figure, West Africa

# Distributed Personhood

- Object agency:
  - Thingly capacity of objects to make things happen
- Enchainment between mind, body, social & material worlds
  - Agency is distributed along this chain
  - Distributed objects & distributed personhood



Gold Hathor pendant, Pylos (tholos)

# Distributed Personhood

- “[a] person & a person’s mind are not confined to particular spatio-temporal coordinates, but consist of a spread of biographical events & memories of events, & a dispersed category of material objects...which can be attributed to a person & which, in aggregate, testify to agency ... during a biographical career which may, indeed, prolong itself long after biological death” (1998, 222)



Thutmosis III stone vase, Crete

# New Materialisms

- Materiality: describes active processes of materialization
  - Creation of material world
  - Matter flows
- Symbiotic relationship between embodied humans & matter
- Argues against perspective which situates **inert matter** in opposition to people / human agents
- Bennett: **vibrant matter**

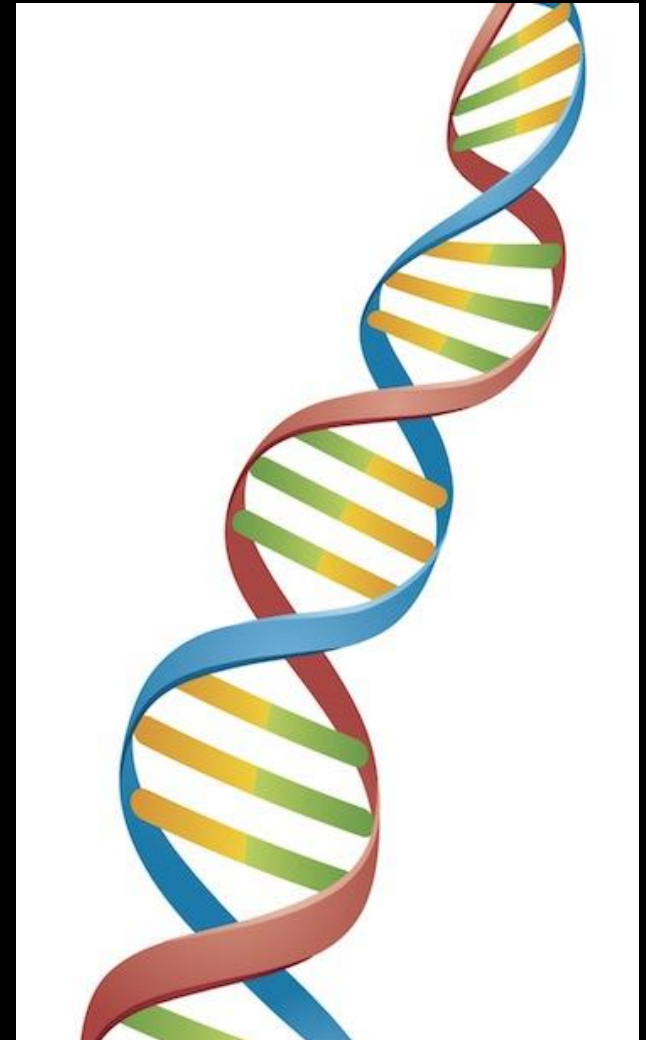


# Vibrant Matter

- “It is materiality – the physicality of matter – that gives things agency” (Boivin 2008, 129)
- Move away from notion that matter is “passive stuff, raw, brute, or inert” (Bennett 2010, vii)
- “The **capacity** of things [matter]...to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (Bennett 2010, viii)
- Matter = **actant**: a source of action, it can **do** things & can produce affects

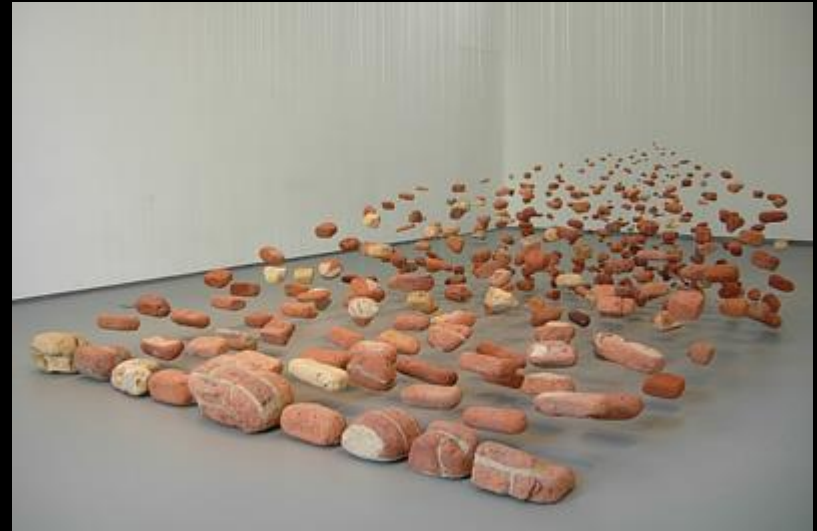
# Material Vitalism

- Specifically pursues the non-human agent
- Equates affect with materiality
- Vitality & agency are immanent (inherent) in matter-energy
- **Conative bodies:** objects, things, matter that “strive to enhance their power of activity by forming alliances with other bodies” (2010, x)
  - Matter / things have agency by “working” together



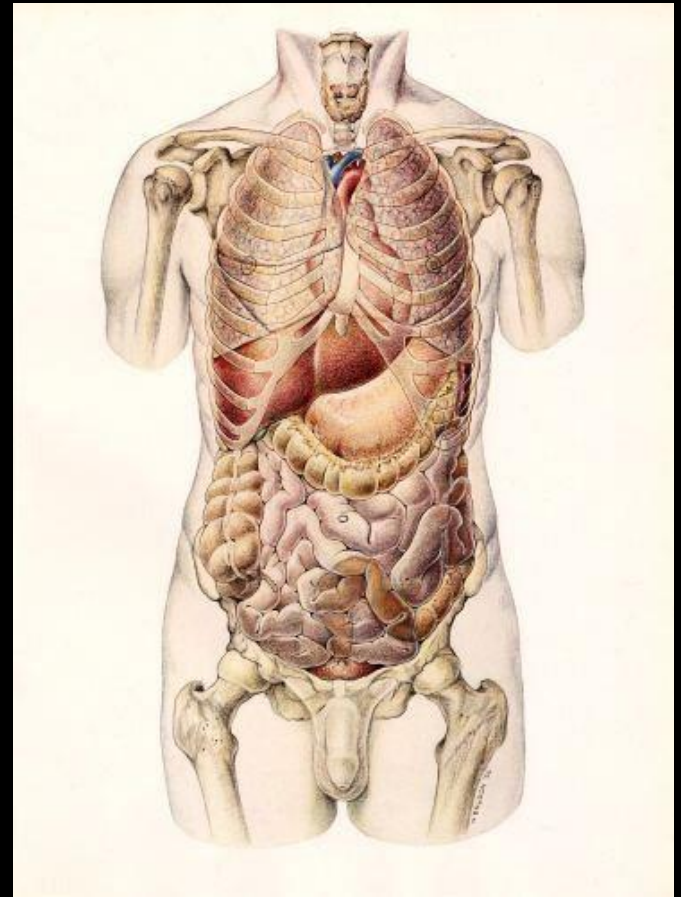
# Thing Power

- “The curious ability of inanimate things to animate, act, to produce effects dramatic & subtle” (Bennett 2010, 6)
  - Things & what they can do
- Intrinsic to materiality
- Argues that this agency is always located within a human-nonhuman group
  - Draws upon the notion of the assemblage



# Thing Power

- Human power as thing power
- Human bodies composed of different material parts:
  - Minerality of bones
  - Metal of blood
  - Electricity of neurons
- “more challenging to conceive of these materials as lively & self-organising rather than as passive or mechanical” (2010, 10)
- Human bodies “*particularly rich & complex* collection of materials (2010, 11)



# Capacities of Materials

- Physical properties or capacities of materials effect material worlds
  - Provoke certain reactions/behaviours
- Metals:
  - Structure of the metal is what it can do
  - Craftsmen's intimacy with material enabled them to discover this
  - To discern a life in metal "to collaborate more productively with it" (Bennett 2010, 60)



Iron knife,  
Cyprus

# Materiality of Clay

- Specific properties of clay enabled the Neolithic:
  - Malleability
  - Interactions with water & fire
- Agriculture: people linked to **place** through soil, tied to the land
- Development of new lived environment: houses & tells
- Manipulated into symbols to reify new social order



Çatal Höyük



# Materiality of Clay

- In many societies clay is perceived to be animate & imbued with “a spiritual energy & life-force” (Boivin 2012, . 2)
- Malleability, allowing it to be shaped, formed & moulded into a multiplicity of forms,
- But transformation of clay into ceramic depends upon an alchemy of material interactions



Base Ring jug

# Materiality of Clay

- More than a passive medium shaped through human agency
- Potters intimately aware of what material's capacities & actively collaborated with them
- Unique properties helped create the vibrant social / material worlds of the Neolithic & Bronze Age
- Social & material worlds are equally result of material forces as of human agency



Base Ring bull, Cyprus

# Summary

- Agency is the ability/**capacity** to **affect**
- Agency should not be equated with intentionality & rational humans
- Gell originally attributed agency to objects:
  - Looking at how material world provoked certain human reactions
  - Distributed agency
- Recently Bennett has ascribed vital materiality to things, materials, matter