ASEM 646B: Topics in Art and Culture: Space as material

Instructor: Dr. Renee Baert

Thursdays, 10a-12p, Winter semester, 2018

The ‘new materialism’ is a descriptive given to an emergent stream of 21st century thought, across several disciplinary fields, that opposes the transcendental and humanist traditions, and the dualism (nature/culture, subject/object, etc.) that is a structuring principal of such traditions. The new materialism holds that all things are composed of material and all phenomena are the results of material interactions. In using ‘matter’ – whether in art, ecology, technology or other – as their focus and framework, its scholars challenge/repudiate a model of ‘representation’. This model does not separate ontology and epistemology as discrete categories; rather - drawing upon the observation of physicist Niels Bohr that research methodology shapes what it measures - these are understood to be “entangled” (Barad).

From one line of approach, the writings of Henri Lefebvre on the social production of space, which considers the meaning of space in the experience of everyday life; of Foucault on ‘heterotopias’ (of space as dialogical, relational and a network of juxtapositions) and geographer Doreen Massey on gender, space, place and “geometries of power” (in particular her contribution to the ‘relational’ understanding of space) provide influential insights into the relation between the spatial and the social. From another, the new materialism is strongly linked to histories of feminism, notably around issues of subjectivity including Judith Butler’s concept “performativity” (of gender as constituted through acts of reiteration and citation, and including its dialogical relation to locality), and Donna Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledge”, with its challenge to distanciated ‘objectivity’ through its considerations of context and environment.

This realm of research has specific relevance to art practices, because of the primacy it accords to matter/material and its processes, and to the active role it gives to the object – which, it is argued, can be an ‘agent’. (“Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers”, declares physicist Karen Barad, a formative figure in this field, whose concepts of “agential realism”, diffractive reading, entanglement and posthumanist performativity are all relevant to considerations of studio practice.) The expanded interpretation of materials and objects, and our relationships with these, open up new ways of working and thinking, and invite new considerations of authorship and of the interplay of subjects, discourse and matter. It also opens up to important questions about art in its relation to global issues and spaces. Through class assignments, the seminar will present case studies of the work of artists whose approach is relevant to our exploration.

.Assignments and grading:

A. 50% class participation

25% In each week, students must read all of the course readings, with a view to discussion. We will proceed with preliminary discussion of each text in small groups, then gathered together for further discussion.

For **each** class\*, students are required to pick **one** text of out of **each week’s** readings assignment, and to write a 250 word summary of, or response to, that text or some aspect of it. These short written assignments from **the first three weeks** (from January 18) will be handed in at the end of the class in which the assigned texts were discussed; subsequently, **two more** 250-word reading responses from the syllabus will be submitted **before the end of term**. (You can be excused from this more focused written assignment on two occasions, but must have nonetheless done the assigned readings.)

25% participation in class discussion

B. 50% case studies: one assignment in two parts

Each student will do research on, and present the work of, an artist or collaborative group (of your choice), whose practice is relevant to the issues under discussion in the seminar. (Details of this assignment will be discussed in class.) You will first present this research to your colleagues in a class presentation (about 20 minutes, including visuals), and subsequently submit a written text arising from this research as your term paper. The term paper, of 2000-2500 words, must make reference to the concepts of at least two authors from the syllabus, elaborated in each instance in not less than 250 words.

25% presentation of research material to colleagues

25% written text of your research subject