

## **Review of the Book: *Ways of Following: Art, Materiality, Collaboration* (Kontturi, Katve-Kaisa, 2018)**

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Ways of Following brings the compelling figure of following to the fore—for artists, curators, audiences, and readers. More than a figure, the book proposes following as a relational, force-ful, material process—a process that activates this text, in the same way that it has the work of its author herself, as a writer, artist, curator, collaborator and audience-member. Just as art has the “potential to make a difference, to challenge habitual ways of being, thinking, and feeling” (p. 9), so too does writing about and with art and artists. This is what Kontturi calls “writing with...processes and flows” (p. 11). There is an admirable bravery to this project’s commitment to follow these processes and flows wherever they might take her and us. In this review I will attune to the materiality and collaborations of Kontturi’s new materialist practices as an artist, writer, and art historian. I will follow the book’s vital and provocative contributions to new materialist research in the arts, process philosophy, feminism and beyond, beginning with a summary of the book’s structure and methodology.

After an opening that situates the author and the affective materialities of art and its followings, the second part of the book finds vital ways to encounter the work of artist Susana Nevado. Here ‘encounter’ and ‘work,’ along with other taken for granted terms, are infused with new life and vibrancy in Kontturi’s writing, as the artists’ practices and the author’s engagements with them unfold. Moving personal stories, evocative descriptive passages, and process philosophical musings weave together to make the fabric of these chapters.

In the third part of the book, Kontturi returns to the sensuous proximity and the sensual relations that have been drawn out across the text. The focus on the mouth is

particularly, painfully, joyfully intense—for Kontturi, for audiences, and for me, as reader. The text which writes with Nevado's work is enlivened by material remembering:

Staring at those primal teeth arouses visceral sensations: the body shivers, goosebumps rise. As the teeth connect with the viewer's body, affect the body, they might awaken 'forgotten' potentialities of the body..." (p.140)

After the grimacing mouth, the rest of the third section lets the preaching mouth and the screaming mouth call us to encounter other works and their makings. Here politics and ethics 'zigzag' energetically and sensuously across the pages of the book, through encounters with the collaborative Sappho Wants to Save You and the work of artist Helena Hietanen.

In the final chapter, Kontturi foregrounds the significance of the material turn in critical theory. She offers a 'follow-up,' with three propositions, circling around ontology, ethics, and politics. Art as movement, art as moving, art as volatile have woven through the book and return to the foreground here and help us remember, materially, the ethics and politics of following and their importance to new materialist research.

As a reader, I am struck by how a sense of movement structures the book, returning to the same artists—artists like Helena Hietanen and Susana Nevado—in different ways, different contexts, bringing to life (differently each time) the studio, the artist, the process, the collaboration, the making, and the work. As following winds its way—winds our way—through the book, it evokes a moving and dynamic relationship between the writer and the artist and the work.

As a methodology, as well as an ethics and politics, *Ways of Following* is a collaboration with theory and theorists, including feminists, new materialists, process philosophers and art critics. It is richly textured between philosophical and aesthetic moments of engagement. As more-than philosophy and more-than art history, the book breathes new immediacy, and immediations, into both. What particularly strikes a chord for me in Kontturi's methodology is how she refrains from illustrating theory, just as she sidesteps representing art. She deftly holds at bay, for instance, the sort of problematic philosophical abstraction that is often found in writing around and in the name of Deleuze and Guattari, two of her theoretical co-composers. The book instead

craftily inhabits their and others' theories with which she engages. While she finds the work of Deleuze and Guattari, along with Erin Manning, important guides to her project and while her engagement is deep and serious, nonetheless, these thinkers do not emerge as heavy-handed authorities. As Kontturi chooses to dance around and with each theorist and artist, she keeps them and their work in flux, ever available for her and the reader's re-thinking, experiencing anew. And so, as she aims, her book "overcomes the kind of analysis that detaches art from its process of production." (p. 11) What is especially affective, and important here, too, is how we are summoned to sense the liveliness of this process for Kontturi herself—a liveliness which animates her own process of research and writing into and for the unknown. This methodology—and its ethics, politics and insights—make *Ways of Following* an important and inspiring contribution to the Sense Lab's Immediations series.

The Immediations series from the Open Humanities Press has provided valuable contributions to new materialist research and this book is a welcome concluding volume. As their forward anticipates, it is through transdisciplinary co-compositions that "thought is lived...most intensely at the crossroads of practices and is enlivened in the weave of a relational fabric". And *Ways of Following* brilliantly fulfills this promise, weaving its own unique relational fabric through art, materiality and collaboration. Kontturi summarises the relational materiality of her own writing practice:

Writing is a practice that necessarily co-emerges with multiple more-than-human companions, and so I want to begin by acknowledging the climates, computers desks, and even the fabric of the dresses I have worn during this book's composition...From weather patterns to felt textures, and everything in-between (including the cockroach that poignantly left its mark on my conceptual fashioning of the particle-sign), these co-emergences have been indispensable to this book's coming-to-being (p. 234).

This writing practice, woven as a fabric, woven with other humans and more-than-humans, follows Kontturi's following practice as an art historian and curator. And these figures, fabric and with-ness, call out to readers throughout the book, inviting us to follow, to experience, to collaborate in a new materialist writing and thinking and

doing practice. As an artist and theorist myself, I find these figures particularly compelling. I respond critically and affectively to the call of 'with-ness'—its call for an ethical and political response, a moving with, researching with, writing with, thinking with. While with-ness is not a new figure for new materialist researchers, I find its elaborations here enlivening and thought-provoking, as they are deeply grounded in thought and practice and the writing itself. With-ness animates following as a practice and is woven into the fabric of *Ways of Following*.

Like with-ness, fabric is more than a figure – it is structural and material. Fabric deftly intertwines the book, from attentiveness to the fabrications of art-making and art-writing, to the fabrics with which artists work, to the fabrics Kontturi herself wears in her own makings and writings, as I cited above. And there are also the fabrics that move and move with art, its audiences, and its spaces. Kontturi offers a compelling example from *Sappho Wants to Save You*, a work with which she was involved as both a maker and curator:

Six full-body portraits of women hang in the air, filling the exhibition space completely; making it dense and intense. But the prints do not just hang there; they oscillate in the air, moved by passers-by and also by their technical construction: the fabric of the screens is light enough to be affected by the currents of air created by the audience and the air-conditioning, [and] the wired hanging system (p. 200).

In attuning us to how the materials, the spaces, the atmospheres, and the audiences are part of the fabric of an art assemblage—an assemblage that makes the intensity and density of a work—Kontturi also helps bring to life a new materialist understanding of art as always relational, always more-than and always in movement. Movement, in all its agitations, suggests a third figure, besides fabric and withness, that resonates for artists and writers and that particularly spoke to me. That figure is stuck-ness. Kontturi is certainly not one to resile from stuck-ness—in her research or in her writing. Uneasy as it is, stuck-ness, for Kontturi and the artists she follows, is not a stopping or deadzone, but something full of potential, calling out to be to experienced. She learns much about stuck-ness, for instance, from one of the artists she follows most intensely and extensively, Susana Nevado:

...in Nevado's vocabulary 'being stuck' means that the art process is still too strongly attached to the realm of the already known. In other words it is not a work of art yet; it is not working on its own (p. 108).

By following Nevado, Kontturi is able to recognize and relate to stuck-ness, as a moment of potential in the collaboration of an artist and her materials. Unexpected recognitions such as this takes time and a collaborative rather than judgemental relationship with an artist. Indeed, collaboration, as the subtitle tells us, is key to following as a practice. Kontturi's writing about art as a collaboration is fresh, and perceptive, co-composing along the way. Collaboration, in all its bodily relations, is both what Kontturi is following in her research and is itself a way of following. And, what we come to understand with this book is that collaboration is not just key to following but also key to a new materialist approach to art history—an approach which avoids the all too familiar individualizings and judgements in traditional art historical writing. Like other new materialist practices, following is deeply ethical in its concerns and methods and collaboration is integral to this. It is collaborative ethics that compels Kontturi's refusal of a judgemental (or patronizing) "godly eye". It is what also animates the sensuous, ever moving proximities of following and attentiveness to art's potentials. As Kontturi puts it:

Instead of keeping a critical distance, following allows for sensuous proximity...The practice of following is dependent on the idea of art as a field of the future: there would be nothing to follow if there was no movement. (p. 140-141)

In this collaborative relationship, the artists are not the all-too-often mute, static, given material for the writer but are themselves complex, active makers who resist easy recognition or fixity. They are not to be taken at face (faciality) value. They call out to be followed. By avoiding a distancing, judgemental approach to the humans and more-than-humans with whom she collaborates, Kontturi models an important new materialist approach to art history, an approach that ethically and collaboratively foregrounds the materiality and process of art making and art writing.

Finally, I'd like to echo the book's concerns about why and how art matters and why and how the materialities of art matter and call for our encounter and engagement.

These are the questions, the problems, that activate Kontturi's important project. And while it is not a book about answers, but rather following propositions and processes, *Ways of Following* nevertheless affords us a re-freshed sense of how art might play a vital role to "change our thinking-feeling" (p.193). As Katve-Kaisa Kontturi's work manifests, "[Following] keeps offering new flows of process to follow, and therefore also new sensations to encounter and conceptions to create" (p.141).

## **Bibliography**

Kontturi, Katve-Kaisa (2018). *Ways of Following: Art, Materiality, Collaboration*. Open Humanities Press.