

Objektiv

Susanne M. Winterling: "New Forms of Life – The Physicality and Poetics of Pictures"

A conversation between Sara R. Yazdani and Susanne M. Winterling

June 11, 2015



Susanne M. Winterling.

Sara R. Yazdani: In 2011, Rom for Kunst organised an exhibition of Tom Sandberg's large-format photographs, hung over the entrance of Oslo Central Station. Black- and-white images denote an entire era of modern analogue photography, both its poetic and its documentary aesthetics. I remember one image from this public project in particular: the child bending and placing her head on the ground. It is present yet remote at the same time.

Susanne M. Winterling: What struck me was the classical physicality of these images and also the way that they are very ephemeral. But another reason to use Sandberg's work as a starting point for our conversation is how in that setting, in the middle of life, they take on a near animated quality. The train station is such a time place and seemed such a strong materialisation of the moments captured in Sandberg's images. This time in this space matters in a station, so one can get very close to the singularity of those moments. When we look at the images, we zoom in and pause them against this background of the busy station. We're aware of the medium, the large photograph, because it's immersed in this context, yet stands out in its singularity.

Yazdani: Sandberg's legacy is profound. The medium of photography has, however, radically changed since he made these works. Media technologies change, art and human perception always develop alongside such changes.

Winterling: Exactly, and another time thing: today, to use black and white photography is to emphasise its materiality; for example, used directly on the wall and blown up large scale it emphasises the reality of how we see images on an HD display. The acceleration of ways of perceiving, the constant scrolling, disposing and consuming of images on screens, not only contrasts with the sentiments conveyed by large- scale black-and-white photos, but also the use of material as content. This recalls the writer and feminist theorist Karen Barad, who, drawing from quantum physics and feminist theory, takes a different approach to the nature of matter that can fundamentally shake our understanding of the line between nature and culture.

Yazdani: It also reminds me of Wolfgang Tillmans' words in an interview with Beatriz Ruf, published in his artist's book *Neue Welt* (2010): Everything is matter continually renewing itself and transforming from one aggregate state into another. His words emphasise that everything on the planet is matter – humans, plants and technologies – and that these matters are constantly transforming and changing one another. This hypothesis seems to linger throughout Tillmans' body of work and invites an exploration of the vitality and formation of life and technologies. Meanwhile, it emphasises tendencies in contemporary art where visual images are assemblages. What if, for once, we did not see images as representations or semantic bearers? What if we started with materiality, media and technologies – the materiality of human bodies, nature, objects and machines – in our understanding of contemporary images?

Winterling: The physicality of an image in Tillmans' photos is often connected to a closeness and intimacy in the tradition of 1990s photography, and talks about the human body and desire. Other images that were really vivid for me when I was invited to his London studio as a young artist are all the still lifes he made, mini stages with light, fruits and food as well as remnants of certain night activities. On top of their intimacy and traces of a social community, there is a life, a kind of animation. For a lot of artists of my generation working with the camera, his work has been a strong influence.

Yazdani: In *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, W.J.T. Mitchell radically underlines the fact that pictures are assemblages of images, objects and media. Whereas image refers to the figure or motif that appears in a medium, 'object' refers to the 'material support in or on which an image appears, or the material thing that an image refers to or brings into view'. The third component of the assemblage, 'media', refers to the 'set of material practices that brings an image together with an object to produce a picture'. Pictures, as he notes, are 'understood as complex assemblages of virtual, material, and symbolic elements'. This complexity arguably lingers throughout new media art. Pictures, photographs or images can no longer be interpreted as pure symbolic representations or mirrors of the world. They're embodied systems, operating in and through larger technical, political, economical and societal systems and not only surfaces signifying language. As Mitchell stresses, pictures have 'lives and loves'. We thus need to move beyond the idea of images as world mirrors. Or do we?

Winterling: They live and love, and include other sensual aspects not only relying on language. The idea of the mirror seems more interesting as a screen. And nearly all the screens we face are reflective like a mirror. The screen has a life of its own. The shiny surfaces and screens that conquer so much of our immediate surroundings in daily life are often more like dark holes, like a Pandora's box.

Yazdani: In philosophy, feminism and art, the theoretical debates are more and more concerned with materialism. These discussions are ontological as well as epistemological and are interested in non-human forces, human perception, matter and objects as meaning-makers. As the professor and writer Jane Bennett has asked: 'Why advocate the vitality of matter?' Her answer is fruitful: 'Because my hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies.' These nonhuman powers thus need to be taken into consideration. They affect how we feel, taste and experience the world. And they most certainly circulate within new-media art. Here, material isn't a physical object, a thin piece of paper, a medium, a photograph, or a colour; it's the substance of material relations. In short, it's a sphere, surface or mechanism where social relations are manifested. This mechanism, or mechanisms,

seems crucial when entering the world of pictures, not only contemporary ones, but also earlier works. Sandberg's large photographs unambiguously do that.

But what is the social life of photography? What is a social surface? And how do they interrelate with one another? As the social is always a process occurring between humans and technologies, the distinction is possibly non-existent. These new social realities manifest themselves in our aesthetic relations with technologies and materials. These works are rendering new forms of subjectivity and have the ability to construct and question not only the materiality of the art, but also the existence of life and bodies. Your work *My Physicality* (2014) emphasises these forms of life explicitly. Human perception becomes key. It's where the viewing subject enters the agency of the work, and where the work enters the subject. This agency is thus always social, always alive and operates in and through human and non-human objects. In your work, it appears that these social processes take place on the surface. Surface is here not superficial, empty or flat; it refers to the agency of media and technologies. For new media technologies generate new forms of materiality. And it's inside and through them that materials are transformed and embodied. The bodily dimension becomes central. Skin, tactility and surface are also emphasised in *A Skin Too Thin (Light to Pink, No. 1)* (2012). Skin is replaced with photo paper, colour, light and signals. Are the materials replaced by skin? It appears they meet somewhere halfway.

Winterling: Skin colour: film and photography have always struggled to capture it. Also, it's still a crucial element in the way lenses and recording devices are developed. Skin colour is a very peculiar phenomenon and thus tricky to work with in any medium. From the inside to the outside, it's how we relate to the world in the first and most immediate sense. We're covered with clothes, of course, but that's also why conductive fabrics will become interesting tools and materials. With conductive fabric or paint we connect to interfaces; one might even claim we can become interface. The first materialisation of this in my work is photographic paper and the way it absorbs and gets absorbed and changed in the exposure process. That process is interesting to me on one side because it's never the same and constantly moves and stays alive, always a singularity, but very visually ephemeral and super-sensitive. Its physicality is expressed in different shades of blue or pink less than we find in biology, but definitely similar or comparable to biodiversity.

Yazdani: You've preferred to use the term 'physicality': physicality of the image; physicality of the material; physicality of the body. What does that mean to you? When and where does physicality happen in photography, and objects of art in general? The term reminds me of Barad, whom I know has been an inspiration to you.

Winterling: Matter and materiality denote a wider range than 'physicality'. I insist on what can be extracted from historical materialism, or other materialist specifications – as a political fact as well as an aesthetic one. In my work I often refer to film and film history as a material, just as the donkey in Robert Bresson's film *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1996) is already an animal with a history. But to speak about the 'physicality' of an image is more to describe and investigate its qualities sensually: how is this happening? How is it talking? The past as well as the future influence us – for example, our perception of a piece of photo paper in an exhibition that has been developing since the opening and is constantly, according to the rhythm of the space and its architecture, exposed to light.

Barad would say: 'the larger apparatus in its particular material configuration enacts particular cuts that materialize determinately bounded and propertied 'things' together with their 'agencies of observation'. A movement, a touch might evolve from light; light might also be matter. As an artist, the entanglement of this is very sexy and it allows for a super complexity even if it's a very simple effect. We can be touched in many ways.

Yazdani: There's an aesthetic interrelation between the material support of the work and its tactility. New materialism is also about how media and technologies process, transform and transmit information. It permits one to explore material that isn't necessarily seen, directly 'felt' or visible. Hence, the digital. For how can one touch, see or feel digital codes, information and signals? Does its invisibility and lack of matter mean that it has vitality? These concerns recall the idea that electronic signals always are embodied.

Winterling: Electronic signals and all embodied waves also refer to the fact that all perceiving is embodied. This is one reason why I like working with 3D animation: you can feel the body being carved into space. Like marble as a material, the grid and wireframe structure allows one to play with touch and the possibility of closeness in a physical way. Surfaces like skin become crucial for osmosis; that's where waves permeate. Like the nature/culture divide, I think the digital/analogue divide has to be changed and redrawn or even dropped.

Yazdani: What has influenced my questions in this regard is Tillmans' exhibition *Central Nervous System* at Maureen Paley's gallery in 2013. The subjects are in one sense becoming what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari referred to as a 'body without organs'. Meanwhile, via the technological possibilities of both the digital camera and the inkjet print, the surface of the bodies in the images has become beyond or 'larger' than human biological skin. It touches you, and itself, almost like it's living its own life, beyond the biological. It has become post-human. The touch is very mechanical, yet very poetic. In the gallery space the images become surfaces that create an intimate space where human perception and the body become essential.

One could therefore argue that the materiality of these pictorial surfaces constructs new social realities. According to Barad, matter and meaning can't be alienated. And science can't be ignored here. This was explicit in your latest show *Drift* at Gallery Parrotta, Stuttgart, earlier this year, where hands, touch, immersion and technology drift through the gallery space. As Barad notes, 'Touch is the primary concern of physics.' This relates to the senses, how humans as well as particles sense and experience one another. As material forces, art objects also drift in social life and subjectivity. Reality and being become phenomena on the surface and its materialization of ourselves, as in Tillmans' *Central Nervous System* and Sandberg's enlarged pictures in Oslo. Here, photography is a medium whose agency empowers its meaning, movement and vitality. It's an object that can reinforce and generate events and causality. But to what extent?

Sara R. Yazdani is PhD Candidate in Media Aesthetics at the University of Oslo and works as an art critic. Susanne M. Winterling is an artist and professor at Oslo National Academy of the Arts. This conversation can be found in our current issue.