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Ex-tensions: Material Entanglement and Intensities

Zohreh Galdizadeh Garmeh

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EX-TENSIONS: MATERIAL ENTANGLEMENTS AND INTENSITIES

by

ZOHREH GALDIZADEH GARMEN

(Under the Direction of Jeff Garland)

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of the intrinsic capacity of matter and material formations and utilization of art as a mode of inquiry. Ex-tensions: Material Entanglement and Intensities investigates the animism and vibrancy of objects and the hidden interplay between materials and intensities that flow through and around within the spaces that confine us. In this body of work, all forms of material configurations are understood as animated and agential and as different representations of the same substance that are only formally diverse.

INDEX WORDS: New materialism, Thing-power, Animism, Sculpture, Installation
EX-TENSIONS: MATERIAL ENTANGLEMENTS AND INTENSITIES

by

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B.A., Ferdows Institute of Higher Education, Iran, 2012

M.F.A., Georgia Southern University, 2021

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS
EX-TENSIONS: MATERIAL ENTANGLEMENTS AND INTENSITIES

by

ZOHREH GALDIZADEH GARMH

Major Professor: Jeff Garland
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Matthew Mogle

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DEDICATION

To my mom, in loving memory.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Three years ago, when I began this journey, I had no idea how life-changing of an experience was awaiting me. I now stand feeling content and hopeful for a wondrous future. This would not have been possible without the help and support of many people to whom I feel so much indebted.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In my work, I have been heavily influenced by the traditional Persian mirror works (Āina-kāri) (Persian: آینه‌کاری) from my native country, Iran. The capacity of reflective surfaces to extend and expand the modes of thinking, engagement, and belonging continues to direct my studio practice.

My practice has come to focus on the agency of objects and seeks to be critical of human exceptionalism and material indifference. On a larger ecological scale, it calls for a decentralization of the human. My installations investigate the intrinsic vitality and the often-unnoticed interplay between various materials and invisible forces that flow through and around within the spaces that confine us. I view the materials used in my work as different representations of the same substance that are only formally diverse.

Reorganizing and reframing the way we interact with mundane materials and the associations among them would make us more enabled first to see ourselves as a part of the material world and then to form alliances with the other non-human material bodies. This understanding, hopefully, would make us realize our smallness and also our limited control and dominance over nature. Alicja Kwade, whose work I have drawn inspiration from, simply puts it as: “we are really poor animals – able to ask, but too stupid to get the answer.” I share a similar belief and plan to continue to situate my work within the discourse of New Materialism. I consider myself a fortunate participant in the object’s nature of being, its endless interplays between materials and forces whose unpredictability leads to an autonomous reality, sometimes independent of the observer.
CHAPTER 2

INTENT

Matter comes in all forms, shapes, and sizes. In classical physics, matter is any substance that has a mass and takes up space (Saunders 1991). Materialism is the doctrine that holds that matter is the fundamental substance in nature, and that all things, including mental states and consciousness, are results of material interactions. Matter and Materialism have been the subject of scholarly debate since ancient times. Therefore, given the intimidating size of the subject, and also my limited knowledge (I am not a physicist nor a philosopher), in this thesis, I only concentrate on the categorization of matter and the potential outcomes of reframing such categorization, specifically, mundane and commonplace stuff of the world in the context of art practices.

We have grown into the habit of partitioning the world into binary and often oppositional categories. These categories can be binary oppositions such as same/other, human/non-human, mind/matter, culture/nature, and so on. In the case of matter, we have insisted to categorize it into raw, passive, non-living matter (non-humans) on the one hand, and on the other, the vibrant, active, living beings (humans). This understanding has deeply desensitized us, humans, toward realizing the true vitality of material formulations and the complexities of their relations. In this thesis, I argue that problematizing such categorizations begins by reorganizing the way we interact with ordinary material and associations among them. It is through such reframing that we open up for a possible awakening to arrive that would make us more enabled first to see ourselves as a part of the material world and then to form alliances with the other material bodies, invoking what Henri Bergson calls “a latent belief in the spontaneity of nature” (Bergson 1984, as cited in Bennett 2010).

I use art practice as a method of inquiry toward a more harmonious and sustainable engagement with all material bodies and a deeper and more intelligent realization of vital things. Jane Bennet describes vitality as “the capacity of things 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). In other words, “things” exert their distinctive agency and intervene in conversations among various material bodies (living and nonliving) in many different ways with multiple degrees of effectivity. Bruno Latour (2004) calls these things “actants”:

“an actant is a source of action that can be either human or non-human; it is that which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events. It is “any entity that modifies another entity in a trial,” something whose “competence is deduced from [its] performance” rather than posited in advance of the action.”

Latour’s explanation is immensely helpful in teasing out the social and distributive agency of material configurations. Particularly, in the context of art practices when attention to distinctive capacities of materials and the interplays between non-human (i.e., material) and the human (i.e., art practitioner) actants need to be foregrounded.

How will aesthetic practices change if we grant the force of raw materials more due? In other words, what difference would it make if this notion of materiality is embraced both in our relational capacity to engage with material things as practitioners and also as spectators or participants? I take these questions as a generative chain that hopefully might lead to a next possibility. By generative, I mean the capacity inherent in art to ask questions rather than trying to answer any. In my studio, as I bear witness to these material vitalities that flow through and around us, I try to invite them in to explore the new possibilities that are hovering over the present moment. From a theoretical perspective, I too, similar to Jane Bennett, rely on Spinozian notions of matter as a touchstone. Baruch Spinoza argues that substance must be that which is both within itself and also conceived through itself. In his faith, everything is connected and irreducible to a simple substrate. In the following section, I delve a bit deeper into the concepts surrounding matter and materiality.
Matter and Materialism

For Isaac Newton and a lot of the thinkers that came before and after him, *matter* was brute, inert, or even ‘stupid,’ as Newton called it. Therefore, in his understanding, matter had to be set in motion by some external power or ghost and it inherently lacked the potency to activate itself (Eagleton 2016, p. 3). Not long before Newton, in a different part of the European continent, Baruch Spinoza, whose ideas, to the best of my knowledge, were never mentioned by Newton, had a different understanding of matter. For Spinoza, matter itself is alive, and not only alive but self-determining (p. 3). In his understanding, to be a materialist means rejecting a realm of spirits and possibly superstition. In the Spinozian framework, humans are part of a material world, perhaps “identical with the Almighty” (p. 4).

The term “materialism” was first used in the eighteenth-century by the Greek philosopher Epicurus. Materialism for Epicurus, among other things, meant freedom from superstition. Epicurus was the subject of Marx’s doctoral thesis and influenced his theories immensely. The materialism for Marx is described as that which is experienced in the world. In the broadest terms, this materialism maintains that whatever exists is, or depends solely on matter. For those who associate with materialist philosophies, the material comes before knowing, in other words, it is there, waiting to be known (St. Pierre 2016).

In new materialism or feminist materialism, scholars do not focus much on the historical materialism of Marx, and mostly see materiality as relational and plural and is invested with vitality or liveliness. In new materialism, matter is agential and animated (Coole & Frost, 2010). However, it becomes hard to define and could mean different things in different contexts. According to Hekman (2010),
“[this] new approach does not have an agreed-upon label. Many have been proposed: several feminist critics of science favor “the new materialism”; Nancy Tuana proposes “interactionism” and “viscous porosity”; Karen Barad favors “intra-action” and “agential realism.” The lack of consensus on a label, however, is indicative of little more than the newness of the approach”.

Therefore, as Massumi (2010) explained that by definition, the “new cannot be described, [for] having not yet arrived”, new materialism provides a space where there are no fixed structures or systems at work, instead, there are multiple “events”. This multiplicity of events denotes a relational character to these events. In order to better understand the relationality of events and how matter is thought and where agency resides, in the next section, I provide a brief explanation of “actants” put forth by Bruno Latour.

Actants and Thing-Power

In Spinozian understanding, bodies have a power to persevere, or a tendency to persist. He writes in a famous letter, that a stone while rolling and falling, “thinks, and knows that it is endeavoring, as far as in it lies, to continue in its motion.” As strange as it might sound, for him, all things are “animate” (Sharp 2007). That is all things possess a power to act and be acted upon that corresponds to the power of their material bodies. It is important to note that this analogy does not suggest that human bodies are emotionless and dumb as rocks, instead, it is inviting to see stones and by extension the rest of the material world as vital. It is exactly this continuity between humans and other beings, that Spinoza stresses. Arguably, the body of the stone is perhaps less capable of acting and being acted upon than a human body. Nonetheless, it possesses an inherent capacity to be the source of action. Bruno Latour uses the term “actant” rather than “actor” mainly to overcome the human connotations. He refers to both non-humans and non-individual entities as well as humans as “actants.” He contends “an actant can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of an action.” The object-oriented philosopher Graham Harman similarly describes objects as actants, “lost in friendships and duels” (Harman 2009). On the
agency of a small piece of stone and the consequence it can trigger, Harman writes: “a pebble can destroy an empire if the emperor chokes at dinner” (Harman 2009 cited in Cohen 2015).

The liveliness of matter does not allude to the molecular motion, nor the work of a transcendent spirit or ghost. Matter is alive because of its capacity to affect interconnected and continuous transformation. Therefore, things have what Bennet calls ‘thing-power’ (Bennet, 2010). Non-human things (natural or technological), like trees, sand, rocks, etc. are alive because of their capacity to insert effects into interrelated assemblages in which they are a part. All things are agents inseparably entangled in an interconnected web of human and non-human actants to make events happen.

**Political Ecology of Actants**

In this section, I address the political capacity of things as actants and try to explore what makes them political actors. In this and the following sections, I continue to rely on Jane Bennett’s theory of political ecology and David Abram’s theory of animism. Addressing such questions, as I have argued before, possibly requires a different understanding of what counts as a political act. John Dewey, the American philosopher mostly known for his theories in education, does not see much “gap between action and political action” (Bennet 2010). Dewey’s theory views participation as what he calls “conjoint action” meaning that material elements experience an associative, combined, and communicative living. These conjoint actions produce a public that Bennett believes “paints a picture of a political system that has much in common with a dynamic natural ecosystem” and opens a possibility for non-human bodies to be realized as members of a public that “participate in the conjoint action” (Bennet, 2010). These non-human members of a public (i.e., a collective) exert their thingness, or agency, using non-linguistic forms of communication perhaps more precisely as various forms of communicative energies and forces.

Non-human actants form ensembles and powerful collectives and “form unexpected relations, trace stories in which humans may or may not figure, acting in narratives of their own” (Alaimo 2010, cited in Cohen 2015). Stacy Alaimo uses the term “material agencies” to describe “the always interconnected actions” of environments, substances, and bodies. Therefore, actants (humans and things)
play active roles within a web of relations, each with their own unique affordances to enable or constrain. Latour asserts that the “most urgent concern for us today is to see how to fuse together humans and non-humans in the same hybrid forums and open, as soon as possible, [a] parliament of things” (Latour 2011). *Parliament* is probably the most useful term here, in underscoring the political and the social realm of material formulations among both humans and non-humans.

Our ways of knowing the world become habitual, structures start rooting, ideologies permeate. Just like Bennett (2010) sees politics lying in the center of affects, Kathleen Stewart (2007) thinks politics starts in the animated inhabitation of things. She writes:

“There’s a politics to ways of watching and waiting for something to happen and to forms of agency—to how the mirage of a straightforward exercise of will is a flag waved in one situation and a vicious, self-defeating deflation in another (as when someone of no means has a get-rich-quick daydream—a daydream to be free at last—that ends them up in jail). There’s a politics to difference in itself—the difference of danger, the difference of habit and dull routine, the difference of everything that matters”

**Animism and Ecology**

In this section, I delve deeper into animism and how it ties to broader in the age of ecological breakdown. David Abram describes the capacity of inert matter to invite other actants into conversations and participation as *animistic*. He then implies that the human organism’s receptivity to these forms of communication has been blunted by a tendency to communicate only using words. Therefore, we participate almost exclusively with other human agents and human-made tools. Abram understands this capacity of things to generate effects as an ability to “speak” (Abram 2018), and similarly, Jacques Rancière, the French philosopher, realizes this power as an act to disrupt and provoke a shift in perception in such a radical way to change what people “see” (Bennett 2010). Regardless of the verb or the type of action used to throw light on the inherent vitality of matter, these ideas highlight the etymology of the
word “object” (from Latin obicere\(^1\), “to throw in the way”), or simply to “act.” There is a caveat here though. Jeffery Cohen (2015) points out that “any speaking of the non-human is a translation, and therefore error-prone, filled with guesswork, and inclined toward fantasy.” In other words, in understanding such potencies, there is a risk of slippage into humanism. It is very important not to reduce the material agencies and the relations animated by diverse and heterogeneous actants to anthropomorphism. Theories of materiality do not suggest giving human-like capacities to materials because that would be the most humanist practice. Giving human attributes or characteristics to objects deny us the chance to appreciate their diversity and otherness and leads to a hierarchical ontology of being. Accordingly, opening our senses to the wider sensuous earth is an attempt at flattening this hierarchically organized structure that has informed our humanist practices. David Abram thinks realizing the material vitalism and entanglement teaches us about the need for “an irreducible pluralism, and for celebrating otherness and radical alterity, radical otherness in our world, not looking to just shelter ourselves among those who think just like us or speak just like us or look just like us, but taking deep, new pleasure in otherness and strangeness” (Abram 2018). At the age of ecological breakdown and instability as a direct consequence of anthropocentrism that regards humans as superior and in control of nature, the feminist theoretical physicist, Karen Barad, stresses the problematic notion of animism, particularly in Western philosophy. Barad (2007) notes:

“The inanimate-animate distinction is perhaps one of the most persistent dualisms in Western philosophy and its critiques; even some of the most hard-hitting critiques of the nature-culture dichotomy leave the animate-inanimate distinction in place. It takes a radical rethinking of agency to appreciate how lively even ‘dead matter’ can be.”

\(^1\) late Middle English: from medieval Latin objectum ‘thing presented to the mind’, neuter past participle (used as a noun) of Latin obicere, from ob- ‘in the way of’ + jacere ‘to throw’; the verb may also partly represent the Latin frequentative objectare.
Our insensitivity and obliviousness toward non-human nature denies intelligence to other objects and species and prevents us from stepping outside the purely human-centric understanding of the world. However, an increasing number of scholars are moving toward a rethinking of animism, which potentially opens doors to, and creates spaces for an ethic of living more responsively with non-human others.

SPACE
PRESENCE OF FORCE

Spaces are not neutral; they are constantly under production. Spaces are not produced necessarily when bodies arrive and start navigating, but rather, spaces are produced even before objects start experiencing them. Majorly drawing upon the joint work of Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Jane Bennett associates an activeness to space that “is not quite bodily and not quite spatial” and highlights that “a body-in-space is only one of [the] possible modalities” of this activity. She continues that this activity of space is better understood through terms such as “indefinite or non-purposive suspense” (Bennett 2015). It is important to understand that she is not particularly referring to the activity of bodies and objects in space here. Particularly, she is calling attention to the activity of intensities or forces that we fail to notice. Deleuze and Guattari write, “material vitalism … doubtless exists everywhere but is ordinarily hidden or covered, rendered unrecognizable” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, cited in Bennett 2010). For them, material vitalism is inherent in matter-energy. Their understanding is not concerned with forms of matter but forces and intensities flowing through and among bodies.

Deleuze and Guattari call this matter-flow or matter-energy “the prodigious idea of Nonorganic Life,” which again has its roots in the philosophical thoughts of Baruch Spinoza. As discussed before in previous sections, Spinoza realizes in things a capacity to produce effects or a vibratory eruption that “persists before and after any [material] arrangements in space.” This emergent quality of matter-energy
is the key concept in the realization of the incorporeal dimension of bodies. This dimension is incorporeal because the forces of encounters are so subtle and small in their level of intensity that they often go unnoticed and are regarded as ordinary. Their forcefulness lies in their capacity to affect. Bodies and spaces constantly converge, emit, and pour into one another, form assemblages that within which the distinction between matter and energy becomes indistinguishable. In this frame of understanding, it is difficult not to think of a notion of materiality that is “not reducible to extension in space” (Bennett 2010). Nonetheless, whatever form these encounters in space appear to us, they, again and again, can become disparate and flowing. Bennett identifies echoes of this vitality of matter-energy in her reading of Friedrich Nietzsche, expressed, in The Will to Power (Nietzsche 1967 cited in Bennett 2010):

“Do you know what Life is to me? A monster of energy . . . that does not expend itself but only transforms itself. . . . [A] play of forces and waves of forces, at the same time one and many . . . ; a sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing.”

VIEWER

In recognizing and understanding the world, we rely on our basic senses, and one is sight. Donna Haraway (1988) points out that the human vision is not passive reflection. She writes: “All eyes, including our own organic ones, are active perceptual systems, building in translations and specific ways of seeing - that is, ways of life.” To communicate the tendency of humans to grow into certain patterns of making sense of the world and seeing in recognition, Minnie Bruce Pratt (1983), the feminist American essayist, writes: “[the] eye that has only let in what I have been taught to see.” Accordingly, our encounters with the world operate within constructions that take the human as the starting point of knowledge and naturalizes the categories such as the same/other, human/non-human, mind/matter, culture/nature, etc. Therefore, we become dulled into a familiar sense of knowing and obsessed with sameness.
In our engagements with things and the world, as a counterpart to exercise of reason and rationalization, perhaps we need to be looking for moments, that Maggie MacLure (2013) aptly calls wonder. On the potentiality of such moments such writes: “[wonderful] moments confound the industrious, mechanical search for meanings, patterns, codes, or themes; but at the same time, they exert a kind of fascination, and have a capacity to animate further thought” (228). Wonder is a suspension of mind, hovering over the edge of the known and unknown, residing in the thresholds. It is this lack of containment of wonder as a moment and that lets it afford “an opening onto the new” (228). These wonderful encounters are not necessarily positive. They can “shade into curiosity, horror, fascination, disgust, and monstrosity” (229) and are not entirely within our control. In fact, it is so relational that it exists within and beyond the person that is affected to an extent that it lacks a clear point of origin or belonging, McLure writes:

“Wonder seems to be “out there,” emanating from a particular object, image, or fragment of text; but it is also “in” the person that is affected.”

She continues by discussing the wonder of objects and draws upon Massumi’s mutual implication of objects and bodies, which considers the thing and the body as mutual and equal prostheses. McLure concludes by stressing the capacity of things to enter into relation with the viewers and the unexpected occurrence of wonder.

EXPERIENCE

WONDERFUL ENCOUNTERS

The philosophical traditions of empiricism, the theory that all knowledge is derived from sense-experience², look to observations and experiences for explanations of the world. A dominant mode of understanding in Western philosophy centers the lived experience of subjects (or

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² Definition from Oxford Languages
artists/viewers in the case of art practice) as given or self-evident and therefore not dependent on the senses to be known to us. Deleuze points our attention to the importance of an empirical world; however, he rejects the understanding that we can know the world through any centered being or body. For him, life processes are shared and interspersed with the world around us. His philosophy, in this sense, “seeks to release meanings and understandings rather than totalize or define them” (Pearce and MacLure 2009). While Deleuze’s notion is aligned with theories of subjectivity that rethink the stability and consistency of the human subject, he is not interested in the meaning of human experiences; instead, he looks to real experiences, phenomena “generated without the human” (St. Pierre 2016), or experiences that occur in relation to themselves, not humans and their categories. This understanding is the refusal of the idea that an entity is only real if humans recognize it in relation to their categories.

Life in this understanding is an open and creative domain of making connections. However, this capacity for things to connect does not begin with the individual human or human at all; rather, “life is a process of connections and proliferations with no ground, end, or single intent” (Colebrook 2002). These connections happen in flows through and beyond material bodies in relational emergences.

PARTICIPATION

The body is the point of contact with the world and the subject of experience. The sensing body inhabits the world, but the boundaries of this body is open and indeterminate meaning that the body is enmeshed and tangled in more-than-human worlds and extends beyond the bounds of its parts. This living body gets its sustenance from the land and contributes to the air and earth, so it is very difficult to distinguish, at any moment, exactly where this living body begins and where it ends (Abram 2012). This notion of the entangled bodies gives voice to the world from our experiences situated within the world, “recalling us to our participation in the here-and-now, rejuvenating our sense of wonder at the fathomless things, events, and powers that surround us on every hand” (38).
Through a sensory exchange that having a body interweaved in space affords us, we are able to participate in the enigmatic multiplicity of life and respond to material invitations and offerings that lie around various corners of life. When our bodies respond to the silent solicitation of another thing or an other presence, that thing also responds in turn, disclosing to our senses some new dimension that in turn invites further exploration (41). Latour (2012) believes truth lies at the heart of these interactions between multiple non-human and human actants. These material transformations and transfers that result from the interactions among the actants are distributed in a manner among a multitude of heterogeneous participants, which are indispensable for any action to occur. Therefore, actions or events occurring within these interactions cannot be traced to a single source of origin since actants are constantly participating in transformations.
CHAPTER 4

THEORY AND WORK

My practice in the MFA studio art program was primarily concerned with the complicated identity of an Iranian female subject in relation to modernity. *Leila, the Unfinished Poem* series was an attempt to make inquiries into the intersection of tradition and modernity and an exploration of the identity of bodies. There is a participatory element in this series due to the enigmatic multiplicity of mirrors. My approach was mainly inspired by the traditional Persian mirror work, Āina-kāri (Persian: آینه‌کاری). For instance, the piece shown in Figure 1, titled “You Against Me,” utilizes the reflection of the viewer to become complete. It tries to highlight the multiple and layered aspect of identity. The deep effect of such encounters is communicated through a layered collage.

![Figure 1. Zohreh Galdizadeh, Leila, The Unfinished Poem, 2018](image-url)
It was not long after until I started to have difficulties with the humanist aspect of this line of work. A mode of research and practice that centered the meaning of lived experience of human subjects somehow seemed problematic to me. I had started to notice the issues that such human-centered frameworks of analysis can cause. I was completely moved by my little research into New Materialism through my encounter with Jane Bennett’s Vibrant Matter. It was truly a wonderful moment filled with confusion when I was playing around with the mirror cubes for the following critique that I luckily got invited to notice their potency to extend the space in the studio in endless ways. It was a fortunate moment to have had my advisor accidentally stopping by to share this marvelous moment with me. At first, there was a great deal of hesitation to turn away from my previous work and dedicate focus and attention to this line of conceptual work.

There was something quite inviting about the cubes that would keep me in the studio after the critique to examine their various dimensions and plays. The sheer potency of these cubes to blur the line between reality and illusion from a perceptual perspective is intensely experienced. The tile-sized mirrors and their placement on the floor, along with a minimal touch between the rock (in its rawness) and the mirror, contribute to the formulation of experience. The mirrors are positioned in a way so that the viewer would not be able to see their own reflections. Contact, shown in Figure 2, is a site-specific piece that questions the viewer’s perception of reality and space. The boundlessness of mirrors and their vibrancy to expand the confines of space invites the viewer to explore and step into moments of wonder. Simultaneously, the rock and its gravity, along with its displacement within a studio/gallery space (as opposed to its natural earthly setting), grounds the viewer in the present moment. This work reads into broader philosophical articulations of reality, space, and illusion.
Further exploration of the vibrancy of things, their political behavior to alter the perception of reality led to *In-formation*, shown in Figure 3. The arbitrary and uncontrolled formation of iron filings and their collective response to attractive and repulsive forces of magnetism and gravity are foregrounded in this piece. The reflections of iron filings compose a full circle, regardless of viewed as a segment or a whole, highlighting the continuous endless formations of matter or as Alaimo (2010) calls it the always interconnected actions of spaces, substances, and bodies.
The use of granular magnetic material is toward emphasizing the collective potency of actants. The magnets and other elements are installed in a conspicuous and visible manner to communicate wonder transparently. In other words, the elements are structured in a way so that the viewer gets fascinated by the formations and their reflections not the image of self.

A continuation of the inquiry into the agency of collective behavior of things/actants led to Con-sensus, shown in Figure 4. The instability and precariousness of the piece demand various levels of cautious movement and participation from the viewer. Gravity and magnetism and intensities of present bodies of the viewers are dynamically at work to keep the piece balanced.

The tension-filled encounters between the non-human and human actants and the heightened risk and danger elements are utilized toward highlighting the Parliament of things and the conditionality of material assemblages. While on the one hand, the bottomless abyss created by the mirrors expands the space and blurs the line between reality and illusion, on the other hand, the sustained tension and possibility of collapse impose on viewers an elevated awareness of their physical presence and space.
Toward extending my research into an examination of the animism of matter to alter the viewer’s perception of reality, *Untitled*, shown in figure 5, returned the use of earthy material. *Untitled* foregrounds the agency of both mirror and glass and their reflective capacities to challenge the boundaries of illusion and reality. The animism of sandpiles and the way they interact with the mirrors and glasses to lure the viewer into engagement is underscored. The truth is formed in the translations between the viewer and the elements. Since a different agency of glass and mirror as melted sand is utilized against the sandpiles. Emphasizing on Spinozian notion of materiality and oneness, an other form of an essentially similar substance, sand and glass, are in dialogue.
Figure 5. Zohreh Galdizadeh, *Untitled*, 2020
Compass, shown in Figure 6 below, foregrounds the tenuous and yet powerful agency of a single thread suspended by two needles using magnets to impose a particular movement in space to the viewer. Similar to Con-sensus (Figure 4) Compass is a site-specific piece that transforms space by utilizing the harmonious and agreemental nature of assemblages. Its insignificance and nonconsequential aspects alter the viewer’s perception of space by demanding an attentiveness to the intensities, nuances, the potential in the minute, and often imperceptible forces present in the space.

Figure 6. Zohreh Galdizadeh, Compass, 2020
In another site-specific piece, *Untitled*, shown below in Figure 7, the agency and force of collective behavior are explored. As a site-specific piece, *Untitled* is integrative as opposed to divisive *Compass* (Figure 6), meaning that it blends into space and functions in accord with the structure. Although the intentional elements of control are more apparent, the collective intensity of needles moving toward the magnets defies notions of extrinsic control.

![Figure 7. Zohreh Galdizadeh, *Untitled* (Close-up), 2020](image-url)
Figure 8. Zohreh Galdizadeh, *Untitled*, 2020
My work returns to the utilization of mirror and its affective capacities to invoke awe and wonder in *A-tension*, shown in figure 8 below. *A-tension* explores the agreemental and precarious aspect of matter-energy in space. The sheer minimal yet tense touches between the dark metal sphere and the mirror, and also the chain and the magnet, give rise to an incalculably unstable experience that heightens the awareness of physical presence. In other words, these tension-filled participatory moments of awe remind the viewer of having a physical body. The physical body of the spectators alone enables them to enter into relations with other non-human matter-energy presences in the space. It is as if their presence sets various forces in motion. Although minor and incalculable yet tense, these gestures linger with the viewer.
Figure 9. Zohreh Galdizadeh, *A-tension*, 2020
In another piece titled *Ex-tension*, shown in Figure 9, the animistic capacity of matter to form various configurations and to extend beyond their formal representation when placed next to mirrors is examined. Mirrors help amplify the distributed aspect of engagement among actants, both human and non-human. By extension, the participatory nature of this piece sets the viewer in motion for exploration, thus actively extending the space. The Spinozian faith that everything is made of the same substance, “ontologically one, only formally diverse,” is the key philosophical concept that *Ex-tension* tries to communicate.

![Figure 10. Zohreh Galdizadeh, Ex-tension, 2021](image)

I have come to realize that my work does not target a specific group of spectators. The viewers are drawn by a sense of genuine wonder, awe, and curiosity and would engage with and examine the
pieces in cross-cultural, cross-age, and cross-gender participation. The intentional lack of concealment in my work tries to maintain the wondrous aspect on the one hand and minimize the risk of appearing as a work of magic on the other. In almost all of my work, magnets and other components are visible.

Figure 11. Zohreh Galdizadeh, *Lacunas*, 2019
Figure 12. Zohreh Galdizadeh, *Untitled*, 2021
My research into new materialism has come to shape and influence my worldview and, by extension, the way I structure and form artistic ideas. Similarly, I draw inspirations from ancient Persian mirror works (Āina-kāri) as well as the work of contemporary artists like Robert Smithson, Alicja Kwade, Olafur Eliasson, Richard Serra, and many others.

*Contact*, shown in figure 13 (right), resembles the iconic work of Robert Morris with large mirrored cubes, shown in figure 13 (left), and at times functions to extend and transform the space by blurring the line between reality and illusion using the affective capacities of reflective surfaces. In the work of Morris, the four large-sized mirrored cubes placed directly toward one another compel the viewer...
to traverse the space while examining their self-reflections in the mirrors as well. They create an uncomfortable awareness of one’s own presence in the museum as both viewer and object, as well as an awareness of the presence of the museum itself. On the contrary, Contact highlights the animism of rock and its agency to enter into conversation with the viewer so as to ground the viewer in reality. The utilization of tiled-sized mirrors in Contact is toward minimizing the effect of self-reflection while activating the space.

Figure 14. Robert Morris, *Untitled*, 1965
Figure 15. Robert Smithson, *Gravel Mirrors with Cracks and Dust*, 1968.
Robert Smithson’s main dialectic is site/non-site. He defines the site as a limitless or open limit and the non-site as a confined, limited space. His *Gravel Mirrors with Cracks and Dust*, shown in figure 14, is an example of a non-site work. The main discursive difference between my work *Untitled*, shown in figure 15, and his work is that *Untitled* is an exploration of collective animism of sand, in dialogue with reflective surfaces of mirrors and glass. The agency of material formulations to alter the viewer’s perception of space and reality is also underscored.

Richard Serra’s monumental body of work, which communicates through invoking a sense of awe and unsettlement using rough and large-scaled objects has been a great source of inspiration for me. Unlike Donald Judd’s boxy objects that were often mistaken by spectators for a place to rest a bag on or lean against. Judd’s work blend into space so harmoniously that they appear completely unobtrusive. As opposed to Serra’s work, I believe my body of work communicates the agential and potent nature of raw
matter-energy through more slick and fragile forms and representations. In that respect, I see my work as more similar to Alicia Kwade’s work. She also situates her work within the object-oriented ontology in contemporary philosophy and engages with scientific theories and social and political conventions of matter. One of her works, titled *Hemmungsloser Widerstand*, shown in Figure 17 is a utilization of mirror, glass, and rock. She similarly explores the agential and agreemental capacity of matter-energy to form stable yet precarious assemblages. While there are similarities, there are differences too. My work engages with other invisible forces and intensities in space like magnetism.

![Richard Serra, Dead Load, 2014](image)

Figure 17. Richard Serra, *Dead Load*, 2014
I consider my work impersonal and about the non-human. However, ultimately, it is about the relationships we as humans, in our various capacities as artists/viewers/participants, form with the non-human and by extension the world. I believe reframing our understanding of non-human actants has immense ecological consequences for nature.
CHAPTER 5

THE SHOW

Mounting and installing several pieces for the final thesis exhibition was a challenge. The composition and arrangements were determined by the nature of the pieces, the anticipated movement pattern from the participants/viewers, floor plan of the gallery space in the Center for Arts and Theatre in the Betty Foy Sanders Department of Art. Upon entrance to the gallery space, the viewer is confronted with the Ex-tension, shown in figure 18, situated in the center of the room. The central positioning of the piece is due to its all-encompassing features, which capture the essential nature of my work.

Figure 19. Zohreh Galdizadeh, Ex-tension, 2021

To the right of the main entrance, Concord, shown in figure 19, is located. Its adjacency to the metallic window frames made the use of magnets more convenient without having to install magnets into the walls.
On the right side of the galley and next to *Concord*, *Untitled*, shown in figure 20, is placed. Despite the space required for the installation of the walls, I wanted the viewer to have adequate freedom of movement around and away from the piece. *Untitled* was by far the most challenging piece to mount and install. The wall panels had to be secured using several techniques because of the forceful magnetic pull caused by needles. The tension had to be harnessed using turnbuckles and airplane wires to pull the wall panels from behind.
Figure 21. Zohreh Galdizadeh, *Untitled*, 2021
Next to the *Untitled*, at the right end of the galley, *Con-sensus*, shown in figure 21, is situated. In its positioning, I made sure the viewer would have adequate safety and freedom of movement because of this installation’s precarious and yet participatory nature. Also, having used airplane wires as opposed to chains in previous installations for hanging the upper mirror gave the entire piece a cleaner look.
Moving along the backline takes the viewer to the next piece, *Contact*, shown in figure 23. *Contact* does not have any ceiling light directed toward. I needed *Contact* to blend into space since it is a site-specific piece, and light reflections on the walls would have altered the experience of the spectator. The placement of the piece on the ground is to ensure that the viewer would not come across their own reflections in the mirrors.
A few feet to the left of Contact, viewers get to In-formation, shown in figure 24. In-formation is slightly elevated and placed upon a pedestal. Similarly, the viewers would not be able to see their own reflections in the mirrors. Its placement in the gallery also gave the viewers adequate exploratory space.
Figure 25. Zohreh Galdizadeh, *In-formation*, 2021

To the left of *In-formation*, is *A(tension)*, shown in Figure 25, is mounted on the wall. Given the piece’s arbitrary and conditional nature, enough room is given if the metallic sphere detaches from the mirror and swings back. A challenge in the installation of this piece was the securement of the chain to the ceiling. For that, we used a piece of lumber, painted black, to latch the hood that is fastened to the chain.
Figure 26. Zohreh Galdizadeh, A(tension), 2021
Figure 27. Zohreh Galdizadeh, *Untitled*, 2021
Slightly away from *A(tension)* and toward the middle of the room, *Untitled*, shown in figure 26, is positioned. And to its left, *Untitled*, shown in figure 27, is installed. The ceiling lights are set up in a way to communicate the illusion of the piece effectively. The distance from the walls is to ensure movement and examination on the participator’s part. And their placement on the ground is to prevent users from seeing their reflections in the mirrors.

Figure 28. Zohreh Galdizadeh, *Untitled*, 2021
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

My graduate studies at the Georgia Southern University have been nothing short of a wonder-filled and unique adventure. I started this journey as an MFA student in the Graphic Design program. Upon admission in 2018, I tried to adopt a focus on interdisciplinary experimentations within the realm of graphic design and sought a personal expressive approach towards *Children of Wars*, a topic I was grappling with at the time. However, this was not the first time the limitations of graphic design as a platform for expression were brought to my attention. Over the years, I had grown increasingly disenchanted with the austerity a professional graphic designer has to maintain at the risk of not becoming self-serving, a personal detachment so thoroughgoing that almost amounts to heartlessness. Such experience enabled my departure from graphic design toward studio arts, a platform that is, philosophically speaking, richer, hence better equipped, and allows material engagement and experimentation as one explores multiple ways, from traditional to the emerging, art can live in and beyond the studio.

My efforts slowly came to focus on and became concerned with the matter-energy after a semester into the studio art program. I had started to take issue with human exceptionalism aspect of my previous work and shifted my focus to examine the relationship between materials. Through a deep infatuation with the affective capacities of reflective surfaces, mirror started to become a central medium in my work.

Betty Boy Sanders Department of Art has served me as an ideal ecosystem for idea formulation, advancement, and collaboration. Through meaningful partnership and cross-pollination with other graduate students and my professors, I was able to connect the assorted planks that are my artistic interests in a cohesive pattern. I am genuinely pleased to have worked with such outstanding cohorts of artists and educators.
Looking ahead, I am confident that my professional and academic experiences have prepared me for undertaking a career in the art world. Ultimately, I intend to pursue a career in academia with an emphasis on teaching, where I can be instrumental in the evolution of understanding of artful inquiries. However, before that, I would like to explore other possibilities in the professional arenas of art in the form of artist residencies. I consider myself passionate about my goals and capable of showing steadfast dedication and would like to use the same drive it has taken to overcome the vicissitudes of my life to inspire myself and others to excel.
REFERENCES


