

MARA-JOHANNA KÖLMEL

**MATERIAL MATTERS, POROUS SOLUTIONS**

Alisa Baremboym: Between the Corporeal and the Digital

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# MATERIAL MATTERS, POROUS SOLUTIONS

Alisa Baremboym: Between the Corporeal and the Digital

BY MARA-JOHANNA KÖLMEL

## INTRODUCTION: ARE WE BECOMING ONE WITH THE PIXEL?

»Are we becoming one with the pixel?«<sup>1</sup> This question could have also been posed by the New York-based artist, Alisa Baremboym, as her work has gradually developed from still life photography into the space of hybrid sculptures.<sup>2</sup>

Baremboym, born in Moscow in 1982, trained as a painter under Jutta Koether. She graduated from Bard College with an MFA in 2010. In a collection of her works, the immaterial digital pixel is now materialised relating to the anthropomorphic form.

»We are becoming one with the pixel.«<sup>3</sup> This statement of the media artist, Hito Steyerl, seems to circumscribe, on many levels, Baremboym's sculptures *6-D* (2013; figs. 1a/b, pp. 91–92) and *Leakage Industries: Clear Conduit* (2012; figs. 2a/b, pp. 93–94). Through a careful examination of the artist's works, my study aims to provide insight into contemporary

1 Hito Steyerl quoted in Bishop 2013, p. 38.

2 I conducted a Skype interview with the artist on April 22, 2014. The conversation is an important source for this study, which is a condensed version of my MA Thesis (Courtauld Institute of Art Library/2014). Questions and topics raised, will be further developed in the context of my PhD dissertation.

3 Hito Steyerl quoted in Bishop 2013, p. 38.

art's concern with (im)materiality and questions related to the effects of digitisation on our existence.

Hito Steyerl's statement also refers to two important aspects of Bareboym's artistic method. First, it illustrates the importance of the digital as a conceptual apparatus and technological instrument for her artistic work. Secondly, it reflects an aspect of her practice that deals with the connection of organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate, and industrially produced and handcrafted materials to a digitised universe.

Bareboym's sculptures are representative of a group of works by contemporary artists of the same generation based in Berlin, New York, and London. Imbued with bodily association, the sculptural works of Alice Channer (\*1973), Nicolas Deshayes (\*1983), Aleksandra Domanović (\*1981), Josh Kline (\*1979), and Pamela Rosenkranz (\*1979), in their deep engagement with materiality, display a novel condition of corporeality tied to digital technology and corporate aesthetics. Designed, produced, and conceived under the omnipresent influence of the digital age, their sculptures do not concretely address the digital computer world. Instead, the digital, as part of our everyday experience, has subtly entered into the physical presence of the works. Bareboym and her peers' installations deal with physical and material involvement with the digital network. They thereby raise the topic of the impact of the digital on our materials and bodies in the »network society«.<sup>4</sup>

Together with a whole generation of artists, Bareboym shares the idea that digital technologies are not restricted to generating digital imagery or screen-based representations.<sup>5</sup> Compared to their Post-Internet art counterparts, with whom the sculptures by Bareboym and her contemporaries have been recently shown in exhibitions such as *Art Post-Internet* (2014) at the Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art in Beijing, *Speculations on Anonymous Materials* (2014) in the Fridericianum in Kassel, and *ProBio* (2013), held during *Expo 1: New York* at MoMA PS1, the digital no longer enters here the world via the internet.<sup>6</sup> These works consequently do not deal with Post-Internet representations. Instead, the digital assumes a material embodiment by referencing the (non-) human and, at the same time, fragmented body. Revolving around the

4 The term network society was among others coined by Castells 2000 and van Dijk 2006.

5 For critics describing the digital realm in terms of the image and the screen, see Bourriaud 2002, p. 69; Foster 2001, p. 105, Jameson 1998, p. 110, Krauss 2010, p. 87, Virilio 2007, p. 14, Rancière 2007, p. 9.

6 See Stakemeier 2014, p. 168.

unresolved place of the body in our networked society, Baremboym and her peer group introduce a concept of »bodily alienation« and its association within recent Post-Internet debates on their »digital native« counterparts.<sup>7</sup>

Their works are symptomatic of a timespan, which has significantly changed through the comprehensive interference of the digital.<sup>8</sup> Their material enquiries circumscribe a point, where the seemingly binary opposition between subject and object dissolves. It becomes, as the title of this study suggests, a porous and not clearly detachable solution. A novel conceptualisation of corporeality and materiality thus manifests itself in their works.

The text concentrates on the practice of Alisa Baremboym. This allows a thorough retracing of the novel understanding of materiality and corporeality through a close dialogue with the artist's works.

In recent art discourse, Baremboym and her peers' works begin to occupy a »structural blind spot«, which is, according to Claire Bishop:

produced both by the mainstream art world's insistence on individual authorship and auratic materials and by new media niche advocacy that misses the point, fixating on the centrality of digital technology rather than confronting it as a repertoire of practices and effects [...].<sup>9</sup>

In her contribution for *Artforum*, published in September 2012, the art critic describes this condition as a »Digital Divide« separating the art world into New Media art and mainstream contemporary art. Bishop argues that although many established artists use digital media in their artistic practice, hardly any artists confront the implications of a life given the ubiquity of the digital.<sup>10</sup> In a subsequent publication in *Artforum*'s January 2013 issue, Bishop references Hito Steyerl, explaining what a re-evaluation of New Media and contemporary art requires:

Rather than simply affirming new media's ubiquity, we need analysis of the way in which – as Hito Steyerl suggests – we are becoming one with the pixel – and what this implies for anthropocentric models of perception.<sup>11</sup>

7 Archey 2013a, p. 34. The term »digital natives« was coined by John Plafrey and Urs Grasser and describes a generation that grew up surrounded by digital technology now being a formative part of their lives, see Prensky 2001 and Palfrey/Gasser 2008, p. 1.

8 See Stakemeier 2014, p. 176.

9 Bishop 2013, p. 38

10 See Bishop 2012.

11 Bishop 2013, p. 38.

As this text will show, Alisa Baremboym and her contemporaries not only contribute to bridging the apparent divide between mainstream contemporary art and New Media art, but also, by articulating the contradictions and specifications of our present through their works, present artistic approaches that broach the issue of »how we [and artistic materials] are altered by the digitisation of our existence.«<sup>12</sup>

### I. SCULPTURES IN THE EXPANDED (INTER-)NETWORK

Alisa Baremboym's sculptures, *6-D* (2013) and *Leakage Industries: Clear Conduit* (2012) mark this text's point of departure (figs. 1–2). Through close reading of the visual-tactile qualities of these installations, the text will allow readers to develop a sensibility for an aspect of her work, and an important trajectory of this study, the materialisation of the immaterial. In Baremboym's objects, *6-D* and *Leakage Industries: Clear Conduit*, the digital is no longer a disembodied and dematerialised form of information processing. Instead, it is materialised in relation to the fragmented and abstracted human organism. Her sculpture series thus examines where the digital connects to the physical, and encourages reflection upon the existence of the contemporary individual in the digital realm.

Hito Steyerl's forecast of an encounter between the digital pixel and the human materialises in *6-D* as an anthropomorphic image-object. In this work, two-part moulds made of bisque-fired pottery are laid out on a waist-high steel table. Their oval base shapes, slightly overlapping each other, seem to be the same. However, the two objects differ in terms of orientation and surface structure. Whereas the overlying form is positioned horizontally on the table and is defined by a convex elevation and a sieve-like inlet, the underlying object, curved in the middle, reaches toward the ceiling. It complements the convex elevation of its counterpart with a concave inlet, alluding to an industrially manufactured drain strainer. The moulds appear to originate from industrial production, although they were carefully shaped by the artist's hand out of red clay. A USB cable surrounds the flesh-coloured forms. It loosely runs twice around the clinical presentation table, as well as the ceramic objects. The cable converges below the sieve-like inlet of one of the ceramic pieces, where a gender changer, a cable adapter for USB cables, completes the arterial circuit. The scene unfolds under the cover of a semi-transparent silk fabric draped over the objects. The materiality of the cloth and the organic forms of the ceramic objects interrupts the cool formal



FIG. 1A

FIG. 1B



FIG. 1A/B Alisa Baremboym: *6-D* (2013, ceramic, archival pigment inks on silk, usb cable with gender changer, bent steel, 101.60 × 38.10 × 52.07 cm)

FIG. 2A



FIG. 2A/B Alisa Baremboym: *Leakage Industries: Clear Conduit* (2012, gelled emollient, unglazed ceramic, usb cable with gender changers, flash drive, hardware, 101.60 × 81.28 × 121.92 cm)





FIG. 2B

language of the steel table and computer hardware. The ceramic forms arouse an association of prosthesis for an unidentifiable body part, reinforcing this contrast. The printed fabric reflects the exact processes under the cloth through a digital photograph taken from above. The digital image, materialised on the silk fabric, lies on the object itself. The print, the grey USB cable and the underlying physicality of the copied object reinforce the material aspect of the once intangible pixel.<sup>13</sup> Their physical presence combines with the ›analogue‹ physicality of the organ-like ceramic forms. Similarly to human skin, the transparent fabric protects the underlying objects, while also initiating a lively interplay between the interior and exterior. Playing with the viewer's perception, the silk is a natural delineation between the sculpture and the outer space, but simultaneously refers to its inner life. A glance at the technoid installation through the sensuous fabric surface is reminiscent of a glimpse into the interior of a (non-)human body. This three-dimensional viewing experience, seemingly doubled through the fabric surface, is reflected in the title of the sculpture as a 6-D state. The tension between the analogue and digital in 6-D coincides with an exchange between the organic and the synthetic. Here, ceramic pieces meet a USB cable, while silk bonds with digital photography. A flesh-like prosthesis coincides with industrial-looking forms. The resemblance of a living circulatory system coalesces with a truly inanimate dramaturgy.

Similarly, we encounter a lively contrast of materials, shapes and associations in *Leakage Industries: Clear Conduit*. Four ceramic objects lie on a transparent tabletop composed of four equal-sized blocks, showing visible traces of their processing. The blocks consist of gelled emollient, a material obtained from petroleum and crude oil that usually finds its use in the cosmetics, food, or pharmaceutical industry. The ceramic objects' resemblance to serially manufactured industrial goods is reinforced by the modularised and industrial-sounding title of the work. At the same time, this is counteracted by their skin-coloured surface. The static structure is made dynamic by a grey USB cable. The cable is connected to a hard drive, which is embedded in the interior of the shell-like ceramic mould. It passes through the tubular ceramic object and ends in a gender changer on the left edge of the table. The USB cable is thus connected and disconnected at the same time. If you were to con-

13 This material definition is much closer to the actual nature of digital than the one widespread in the art world. From a strictly technological and scientific point of view, digital simply means something divided in discrete, countable units using whatever system one chooses. This can be for example the fingers (digits) of one's hand. See Cramer 2014.

nect the cable to a computer, a digital file stored on the hard drive could actually be opened. It contains the animation of a spinning grinder gear, familiar to anyone who loads computer programs. In this context, it is equally a visualisation for an action that leads to nowhere. The digital network in *Leakage Industries: Clear Conduit* is thus not merely suggested by the grey USB cables, the hard drive, and its slumbering digital file. It is also physically embedded in the fragmented and standardised conception of the prosthetic-like ceramic forms. It penetrates and pervades them.

The installation is generally reminiscent of an unconnected system of unidentifiable organs. The idea of a human organism is reinforced by the artery-like USB cable and the flesh-coloured ceramic objects. This association is sharpened by the anatomical properties of the employed materials. The ceramic objects are arranged on an amorphous surface of gelled emollient. It is defined by a tactile and simultaneously repelling visual presence. Over the course of the work's presentation, the mineral oils of this gel slowly penetrate into the porous ceramic pieces. Thus, the digital not merely leaks, as the title of the work suggests, into the porous material of the ceramic, but also in its analogue organic subsurface. The ceramic objects also possess physical properties similar to the gel. They exude the soaked-in substance over the period of presentation like a skin, making the flesh-tone gradually darker. This process revives the seemingly dead materials in Baremboym's sculpture. The human circulation system already hinted at in the formal language becomes an actual animated organism, and is thus subject to living logic.

Baremboym's amorphous installations *6-D* and *Leakage Industries: Clear Conduit* have an artistic life of their own. The encounter between hardware and software in these works is consistent with a material encounter between the anthropomorphic and the artificial, the inanimate and the animate, the human and the technoid, or the digital and the physical. This strange intermediate zone between mechanics and organics serves as an abstracted image of the human body. Baremboym's installations become abstractions of a body »with ominous tones of simultaneous extension and preservation, as well as potentially overextended physicality of abnormalities.«<sup>14</sup> In an interview, the artist remarks about her sculptures:

14 Alisa Baremboym quoted in Katrib 2013, p. 62.

There is no longer a line between organic composition and appendage [...] these appendages exist somewhere between hardware and software, fully integrated and functioning along with us.<sup>15</sup>

It is the interplay between the prosthetic and the human body, and between the appendage and the organic composition, that we encounter as a recurring thread throughout the artist's works, also including *Untitled* (2012), *Travel Impression* (2013) and *Porous Solutions* (2013; figs. 3–4).

A novel understanding of prosthetics is articulated in Baremboym's sculptures. It does not begin at the physical boundaries, but rather reinterprets and remixes the body, its boundaries, and its functions. The definition of the prosthesis is thus inverted.<sup>16</sup> Situated between representation and abstraction, the prosthetic-like ceramic forms in her works are robbed of any applicability. The former euphoria and fascination with the prosthetic body of thinkers such as Donna Haraway, Paul Virilio, N. Katherine Hayles or Avital Ronell has flowed into strange forms and material mixture here. Ceramic impressions of industrially produced goods, in combination with USB cables, a hard drive, and a gelling agent, now awaken associations with skin, organs or tissue.

In *6-D* and *Leakage Industries: Clear Conduit*, the employed materials represent a painful and poignant picture of a bodily experience, solidified into form. They reflect a living logic, penetrated and »polluted«<sup>17</sup> by technology and industrial products. The human is split into its component parts, becoming, as suggested by Jean Baudrillard, a »fractal subject«.<sup>18</sup> This prosthetic condition can be interpreted as an effect of our life in a technological and post-industrial »network society«.<sup>19</sup> Their mediating between the corporeal and the digital, or the actual and the virtual is deeply tied to our moment of contemporaneity. In today's Western society, we exist in a hybrid state of constant physical and digital connectivity, catalysed by the introduction of the Internet in the 1990s, its transformation into Web 2.0 in 2003, and the advent of smart phones in 2007.<sup>20</sup> For a whole generation of people, the former separation between being online and offline has given way to a state of being

15 Ibid.

16 In its original and grammatical meaning, prosthesis describes »the addition of a syllable to the beginning of a word« and as of 1704 the term is used for a »replacement of a missing part of the body with an artificial one«, see Wills 1995, p. 218.

17 Katrib 2013, p. 58.

18 See Baudrillard 1989.

19 See Castells 2000

20 See O'Reilly 2006 and *ibid.* 2012, pp. 32–53.



FIG. 3 Alisa Barenboym: *Travel Impression* (2013, ceramic, travel waist pouch, flat bungee cable, steel, 101.60 × 40.64 × 45.72 cm)



FIG. 4 Alisa Baremboym: *Porous Solutions* (2013, ceramic, custom webbing, hardware, gelled emollient, mylar, archival pigment inks on silk, magnets, bent steel, 127.00 × 38.10 × 50.80 cm)

inline with the digital internetwork. This condition is characterised by a penetration of our digital information technologies »throughout the whole realm of human activity.«<sup>21</sup> We live today in and through the network. In Baremboym's sculptures, the digital pledge of alliance assumes uncanny characteristics and thereby finds its artistic interpretation.

Curators and critics tend to place Baremboym's approach in the proximity of the debates on Post-Internet art. The term, ›Post-Internet art‹, was first introduced in 2001, coined by the artist Marisa Olson, elaborated in an eponymous blog and further theorised by a group of other artists.<sup>22</sup> Since 2008, debates have been conducted with great relevance in networks online and offline. In April 2014, the first extensive book on Post-Internet art, *You Are Here: Art After the Internet* appeared, along with the exhibition, *Art Post-Internet*, in Beijing, which included some of Alisa Baremboym's works.<sup>23</sup>

During the development of our network society, the focus of artistic and critical discourse has distanced itself from notions such as New Media or Net art as a discrete entity of culture. It thus evolved into a discussion about conscious re-configuration of *all* culture through the digital and the internet.<sup>24</sup> This reorientation is called ›Post-Internet‹. The prefix ›post‹ in this context is understood not in the sense of Hegel's idea of progress, as in postmodernism or post-history. Instead, the term refers to a cultural shift of the digital and the internet in Heideggerian terms, from event to being. It does not denote an end of the internet or digital, but rather describes a persistent mutation. Post-internet refers to a continuous »internet state of mind – to think in the fashion of the network«, as the result of a »complete embeddedness in a ubiquitous network culture.«<sup>25</sup>

In terms of the complex tendencies of this discourse, Baremboym's sculptures similarly confront the recipient with the implications of a life ›inline‹. Her artistic practice reflects a preoccupation with the application, use and consequences of digital technologies in our so-called ›Post-Internet‹ era, defined by Artie Vierkant as »the development of attention as currency, the collapse of physical space in networked culture, and the infinite reproducibility and mutability of digital materials.«<sup>26</sup> The debates about Post-Internet art are, however, still dominated

21 Castells 2000, p. 5.

22 See Manovich 2001, Debatty 2008, McHugh 2011, Vierkant 2010, Novitskova 2010.

23 See Kholeif 2014.

24 See Connor 2014, p. 61.

25 Archey/Peckham 2014.

26 Vierkant 2010.

by an extended discourse on image matters, due to its roots in Net and Internet art.<sup>27</sup> These image regimes influence the works of artists such as Trisha Baga, Cory Arcangel and Jeremy Bailey. At their worst, they thereby run the risk of producing »homogenous, abundant output for market-ready net art.«<sup>28</sup>

Bareboy's works, *6-D* and *Leakage Industries: Clear Conduit* depart from this approach. They go beyond internet-induced image experiences, towards a material embodiment of the digital, in reference to the human form. Bareboy's installations thematise a condition of bodily alienation. Instead of »plumbing the immaterial substances of new media«, Bareboy resorts to the manipulation of their (im)material remnants.<sup>29</sup> This digital setback of the hyper-connected and simultaneously »fractal subject« is inseparably connected to the past.<sup>30</sup> The undercurrent of modern and postmodern art is present in her sculptures.<sup>31</sup> The art-historical positioning of Bareboy's sculptures on a diachronic axis leading into the past will thus allow us to identify an important symbiosis running through her work. This synthesis is deeply tied to her understanding of materiality and corporeality.

## II. RE-WORKING THE FORMLESS

Considering the transformative notion of corporeality and materiality in Bareboy's works, it is worth turning attention to the 1960s concepts of *Eccentric Abstraction*, *Anti-Form*, and *Abjection*, and their revival, along with techno-infused artistic experiments, in the 1990s. Bareboy's sculptures, including *Syphon Industries* (2013; fig. 5) and *Leakage Industries: Soft Screw* (2012) are evocative of a tendency in the art of the late 1960s theorised in the exhibition and essay *Eccentric Abstraction* by Lucy Lippard in 1966 and in Robert Morris' text *Anti-form* accompanying his show *9 at Leo Castelli*, in 1968.

The »formless« objects by Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Keith Sonnier, Bruce Nauman and others presented in Lippard's and Morris' shows shared a »non-sculptural tendency«,<sup>32</sup> with haptic and very sensual qualities, due to their unusual material compound and alternation between soft and solid forms. Gangly and awkward, or strangely ele-

27 See Stakemeier 2014, p. 168.

28 Chan 2014, p. 117.

29 Archey 2013a, p. 35.

30 See Baudrillard 1989.

31 The artist was exposed to visual art from an early age, encouraged by her parents.

32 Lippard 1971, p. 99.





FIG. 5 Alisa Baremboym: *Syphon Industries* (2013, archival pigment inks on silk, gelled emollient, ceramic, steel, vinyl, tubing, hardware, 152.40 cm × 114.30 cm × 6.35 mm)

FIG. 6 Eva Hesse: *Top Spot* (July 1965, tempera, enamel, cord, found objects (metal, plastic, porcelain), particle, board, wood, 208.30 × 54.00 × 32.40 cm / variable)



FIG. 6

gant, the works exhibited references to the body through material agglutinations of new materials of their day, including latex, rubber, resin and poured polyurethane. These aesthetic properties were described by Lucy Lippard as a »reconciliation of different forms, or formal effects, a cancellation of the form-content dichotomy.«<sup>33</sup> Robert Morris portrayed a similar phenomenon in his essay *Anti Form*, published two years later. He advocated the processed character of the chosen art works and their direct investigation of unorthodox materials.<sup>34</sup>

Baremboym's sculptures are evocative of this tendency in the art of the late 1960s, fusing a rational, minimalistic, formal basis with sensuous anthropomorphic elements.<sup>35</sup> Informed by a contamination of aesthetic categories and a hybridisation of

materials, her works equally negotiate the space between sensuality and rationality. Yet it is precisely this repulsive-seducing, sensuous-visual, and tactile-visceral encounter with them that, in the absence of emotional interference and literary pictorial associations, separates her work from those of her Surrealist forerunners, such as Hans Bellmer, Giacometti and Yves Tanguy, and all other ›disagreeable‹ objects.

Baremboym's artistic works instead inscribe themselves in a tradition of female artists, without pursuing an explicit feminist agenda. The capacity to disturb viewers, or, as Julia Kristeva writes in *Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, to draw them »toward the place when meaning collapses« closely binds Baremboym's practice to Lee Bontecou, Eva Hesse (fig. 6) and Louise Bourgeois' works.<sup>36</sup>

From her famous precedents, the artist incorporates an employment of material dynamics, the swinging between structure and its dissolution. This flowing and concentration of form is always tightly associated with sensuality, presenting a disorganised subject.

While, in the works by Bontecou, Bourgeois and Hesse, the combination of latex, plastic, wax, rubber, fibreglass or fur constituted the formless materiality of their *Eccentric Abstractions*, Baremboym's materials originate from anonymous, impersonal, and digitally saturated

33 Ibid., p. 100.

34 See Morris 1968.

35 See Lippard 1971, p. 99.

36 Kristeva 1982, p. 2.

industrial productions of our times. Her installations are determined by gelled emollients, bungee cords, USB cables, sticks or belts, which she fuses with handcrafted ceramic pieces or digitally printed silk elements. Bourgeois and Hesse used their materials and their transformative potential to abandon the ›ennobled‹ vertical, in order to dissolve the art on the floor or in the corner. Baremboym, however, reintroduces the aura-creating effect of the plinth with the industrial, manufactured, and steel-forged presentation devices of her installations. Considering her sculptural works, one can therefore only conditionally speak of a ›liberation‹ of form and content. Shining through the relationship between non-linear form and freedom among many artists of the 1960s and 1970s, this concept was motivated by the social context of the time, its utopias, enthusiasms, and progressive moods of the post-war era and the hippy movement.<sup>37</sup> ›Excessive sensuality‹ was here an appropriate strategy of social resistance, and strongly received in leftist circles. Notions of ›scatological‹, as Lucy Lippard appended to Bourgeois objects, as well as ›echoes of polymorphic sexuality‹ as a ›refusal and liberation strategy‹, linked via Sigmund Freud to the philosopher Herbert Marcuse, seem to be suitable interpretations of most of the formless objects of this time.<sup>38</sup> Yet in Baremboym's works, originating from the artist's entanglement with our 21<sup>st</sup> century network society, supersaturated by digital technologies, these interpretations are only conditionally fruitful.

It is, however, important to emphasise, that the technological means were developed to realise our digitalised post-industrial society during the same period of ›sensual counterculture‹ and art infused by *Eccentric Abstractions* and *Anti-Forms*. This development was catalysed by the invention of the personal computer. As Charlie Gere points out in his book *Digital Culture*, this evolution in the late 1960s is, on one hand, based on an understanding of the possibilities of digital technology arising from military-funded research during the Cold War and the cryptologic demands of the Second World War.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, the American artistic counterculture and Avant-Garde facilitated this development. In this framework, media theorist Marshall McLuhan, architect Buckminster Fuller, artist John Cage, and others negotiated utopian ideas of digital technology as socially progressive and capable of expanding human potential beyond its military use.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the tools for

37 See Lippard 1973, p. vii.

38 Marcuse 1955 and 1968.

39 See Gere 2002, p. 118.

40 See *ibid.*, p. 116.

realising ideals of interconnectivity, self-realisation, and self-expression were developed within this context.<sup>41</sup> The aura, assembled by Cold War technologies, Avant-Garde art practices, West Coast counter-culture, and Techno-Utopianism, is immanent within the digital technologies we use today. This appearance also seems to shine through in Baremboym's works, as an interaction of both elements and leftovers of the sensual, as well as rationalised, Techno-Utopian countercultures of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>42</sup>

In contrast to the works discussed in context of *Eccentric Abstraction* and *Anti-Form*, her sculptures witness coldness, a sense of impersonal or objectified subjectivity tied to digital technology and corporate aesthetics. Their visual properties seem to derive from *New Aesthetics*, emerging out of Post-Internet debates. The artist and writer James Bridle describes these aesthetics as an »increasing appearance of the visual language of digital technology and the internet in the physical world, the blending of virtual and physical«. <sup>43</sup> The coldness of Baremboym's sculptural pieces determined by their (im)material physicality also results from their process of pre-production. They are designed with Adobe Photoshop on the computer before they find their way into the third dimension.

These aesthetic-formal qualities also distinguish her works from a tendency of *abject art* recurring during the 1990s with desublimatory investigations of abjection within the works of Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith, Helen Chadwick, Mike Kelly, John Miller or Matthew Barney.<sup>44</sup> Scatological assemblages, bodily fragments, and base materials, such as dirt, grunge or other traces of sexual differences, are used here as a strategy to defile the white cube. They literally evoke an image of the body as a production site.

Baremboym's aesthetics are far removed from the 1990s work in their sterility, possessing an objectified clinic appearance. This partly results from the artist's interest in medical equipment. Compared to the psychoanalysis-infused approaches of her 1970s and 1990s counterparts, the artist seems to view the human body like a doctor, from an externalised point of view.

Chadwick (fig. 7), Smith, and other artists are resurging and recuperating the primordial body, via fragments, fetishes, traces, and

41 For example within the movement Art and Technology (EAT) organised by John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, and engineer Billy Klüver, see *ibid.*

42 See *ibid.*, p. 18.

43 Bridle 2014, p. 21.

44 Baremboym studied under John Miller as he told me in a conversation.

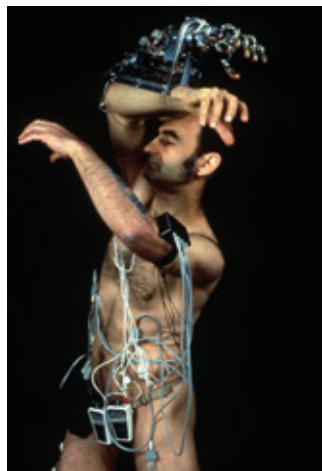


FIG. 7 Helen Chadwick: *Meat Abstract No. 5, Heart of Liver* (1989, polaroid, silk mat, approx. 81 × 71 cm)

FIG. 8 Stelarc: *Third Hand* (1980, Tokyo, Yokohama, Nagoya)

part-objects, at a time when corporeality is increasingly being replaced and eclipsed by the rise of the internet, technology, and prosthetics.<sup>45</sup> The artistic works by Stelarc (fig. 8) and Orlan mirror this other tendency in art, tied to the augmentation, enhancement and thus transcendence of the human body toward the post-human. This moment in time coincides with Florian Rötzer's edition of the *Kunstforum International* (1996) on the future of the body, Jeffrey Deitch's touring exhibition, *Post Human* (1992–1993), and a wide-ranging discussion of the utopias of the post-human body among art and media theorists, as well as philosophers.

Bareboy's works move between the collapse and failing of the human body and the aspiration for bodily completeness. In her sculptures, the human subject, on the threshold of becoming post-human, is thus mediated as an image of the human body in crisis. Aspects of the post-human are present, as the artist herself emphasises. However, the heterogeneous and contradictory material components of her works are still waiting for their impulse-generating and future-oriented transformation, in order to achieve full potential. Thus, technology and the digital are nothing arresting in her sculptures. Instead, they become the medium of an effete euphoria, a relict that has returned from the past.<sup>46</sup> Considering its post-industrial and digitalised surroundings, the hu-

<sup>45</sup> See Taylor 1993, p. 80.

<sup>46</sup> In my Skype-interview, the artist considers the USB cables in her works not primarily as a sign of connectivity but as »left-overs«, replaceable parts that will soon disappear.

man scale has been relinquished in favour of states of aggregations, a modular commodity, a cultural artefact. In her works, identity emerges from interplay of surfaces and aggregations, the exteriorisation of all interiority. Compared to her artistic forerunners, this physical condition of her objects calls into question today's internetworked realities, where hybrid states of being coexist but are equally dispersed.

### III. TOWARDS A NEW MATERIALITY IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Baremboym's ›formless‹ works dissolve binary oppositions between subject and object. Her novel understanding of (im)materiality and corporeality, is thus evocative of the point of departure of the 1985 exhibition, *Les Immatériaux*, at the Centre George Pompidou.<sup>47</sup> Its curators, French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard and Thierry Chaput, formulated the idea for the exhibition as a question:

Do ›immaterials‹ [which in its contradiction denotes a material which is not matter for a project] leave the relationship between human beings and material unaltered or not? – This relationship being understood as it has been fixed in the tradition of modernity, for example by the Cartesian programme of becoming the master and processor of nature?<sup>48</sup>

In this light, it is important to emphasise that the exhibition *Les Immatériaux* questioned the division between mind and matter as modernity's central figure of thought. This was based on the post-war developments of new materials, new media, new ways of telecommunication, and informatics.<sup>49</sup> With the concept of ›immaterials‹, Lyotard argued that the relationship between man and material and especially his self-conception would alter to the extent that technology would be able to reassume the abilities of the logos, by storing and processing dematerialised data.<sup>50</sup> In light of this increasing penetration of mind and matter, Lyotard's neologism, *Les Immatériaux*, expressed that the (im)material could no longer be viewed as an inert object opposing an intelligent subject, but instead now as »cousins in the family of ›Immaterials‹.«<sup>51</sup>

47 The exhibition was held in the Main Gallery, 5<sup>th</sup> floor, from March 28–July 15, 1985. It was conceived by the Centre de creation industrielle for the Centre national d'art de culture Georges Pompidou, of which Jean-François Lyotard was the chief organiser.

48 Lyotard 1985, p. 162.

49 Lyotard 1986, p. 10.

50 See Lyotard 1985, p. 162.

51 Ibid., p. 159.

FIG. 9-11 Installation views of works by Josh Kline, Alisa Baremboym, and Aleksandra Domanović at the exhibition *Speculations on Anonymous Materials*, Fridericianum Kassel, 2014



Presenting this condition as a state of unease and disarray, *Les Immatérielles* should thus sensitise the visitor to this development determined by the dissolution of the concept of matter as a solid building material of reality.<sup>52</sup> For Lyotard, digitisation would introduce a final level of abstraction into this process by imposing a finite scheme of encoding that replaced matter with the language of an abstract universal code, the digital code – a code without an analogy to its origin.<sup>53</sup> This dawning post-modern condition translated itself into a labyrinth-like exhibition environment, an uncanny data space. Lyotard concluded that, along with the dematerialisation of matter, man would experience his own dissolution:<sup>54</sup>

As a result of this, the ideas associated with one of material and which lend support to the immediate apprehension of an identity for man are weakened. The idea of general interaction is strengthened.<sup>55</sup>

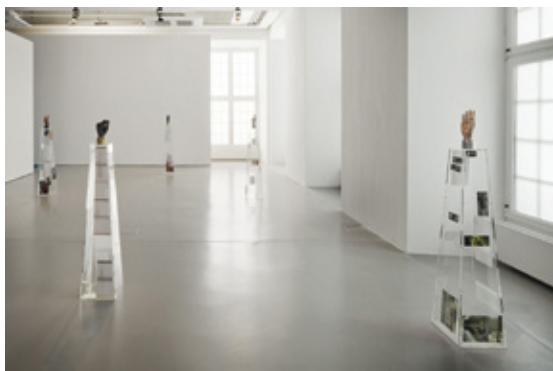
The complexity of Lyotard's ambitious exhibition project disclosed the horizon that largely defines today's (inter)network society. This is also mirrored in the concerns of Alisa Baremboym's sculptures and in the recent works of her contemporaries. Their concern could be articulated as follows: Where there is what Lyotard and others call »a translation of

52 See *ibid.*, p. 170.

53 »The model of language replaces the model of matter«, see *ibid.*, p. 164.

54 »The word human, as substantive adjective, designates an ancient domain of knowledge and intervention which the techno-sciences now cut across and share.« See *ibid.*, p. 162.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 163.



things into signs<sup>56</sup> the increasing dematerialisation of all material and thus a triumph of semiology over materiality, what room is left for the corporeal?

Bareboym's return to (im)materiality can thus be read as an attempt to resurge corporeality in our networked times and to bring it back into the equations of her Post-Internet peers. A similar approach can be seen in numerous works by Alice Channer, Nicolas Deshayes, Aleksandra Domanović, Josh Kline, and Pamela Rosenkranz, who have been exhibited or discussed along with Bareboym's works (figs. 9–11). As the re-skilled coincides with the outsourced, an aesthetic emerges in these works that is nourished by an omnipresence of the digital, corporate products of our post-industrial age and classical sculptural approaches. Their turn towards materiality, fusing the hand-crafted with the mass produced, could then be read as a way to »emotionally« and »logically« charge the alienated processes of Post-Internet productions.<sup>57</sup> By juxtaposing craft techniques with state-of-the-art technology, the aesthetics of their works move between post-human future scenarios and archaeological remains of the past. Bareboym and her peers' works seem to mirror a state of crisis and fragmentation in terms of both the artist and the aesthetic object. Where does the subject in these works end? Where does the object begin? Where exactly is the interface between subject and object? Here, an altered subject-object relationship manifests, reminding us of Lyotard's future vision formulated as a question at the core of *Les Immatériaux*. In this regard, one could appropriately call these works ›objects‹ instead of ›objects‹, which, according to

56 Docherty 1996, p. 157.

57 Archey 2013b, p. 39.





FIG. 12A/B Alice Channer:  
*Artificial Intelligence* (2012,  
digital print on accordion  
pleated heavy crepe-de-chine,  
mirror polished stainless  
steel, chromed aluminium,  
141 × 192 × 15 cm)

Julia Kristeva, describes a state of dissolution where »the borders between the object and the subject cannot be maintained«. In other words, »the substance of the subject is called into question, endangered«. <sup>58</sup> On one hand, the »object« qualities of these works are mirrored in the aesthetic features. Their blurring of clear boundaries between bodies, objects and contexts emphasise a conflation of subject and object. Here, they rather seem to be indistinguishable, as opposed to being two separate entities.

Dissolution of subject and object is also mirrored in terms of their production process, which always grants the employed materials and technologies a certain autonomy. It thus makes them »animate resources« with logic of their own, as Baremboym points out. In these works, materiality is something more than mere matter. <sup>59</sup> It is active, self-creative, productive, and unpredictable. The employed materials and digital technologies possessing a multitude of industrial histories and agencies thus consciously reflect and disturb the conventional sense

<sup>58</sup> Kristeva 1995, p. 22.

<sup>59</sup> The 3-D scanning and printing devices employed by Kline and Domanović significantly determine their works. Baremboym can not control the interaction between the handcrafted ceramic forms and the industrially produced gelled emollients in *Leakage Industries: Clear Conduit*. The outcome of Channer's reptile prints featuring heavy crepe-de-chine with digital prints is determined by the natural property of the material and the width of her digital printer, see Geldard, 2013, p. 54.

that the agent is exclusively human. This also affects the topic of authorship, making the artist only »one of many authors«, as Channer observes (figs. 12a/b).<sup>60</sup> In this regard, the author, like his employed material, is both subject and object, or rather as much object as are his works. Our anthropocentric worldviews are thereby significantly challenged. In these objects, Lyotard's vision at the heart of *Les Immatériaux* has therefore found its artistic embodiment. However, compared to Lyotard's ›immaterials‹ and other artistic forerunners, the digital appears in the installations of Baremboym and her fellows as a »meta-medium«. <sup>61</sup> It has become a significant component of their material formation. What Lyotard described as the »dematerialising logic of coding« thus experiences its very tangible incarnation. <sup>62</sup> For Lyotard, as art critic Kate Linker argues, »the loss of matter as palpable medium meant the subversion of the Modern concept of production implying an origin, author, finality of product«. <sup>63</sup> This logic is reversed here. Re-materialised and bound with matter, in these works the digital has again become a »production paradigm«, as Kerstin Stakemeier suggests. <sup>64</sup> What is then at the forefront of these works is not primarily the idea of technological progress, leading toward the vision of the dematerialisation of all material and the subversion of the concept of production. Quite the opposite, it is the material rebound of a dematerialised future vision as part of a fossil and partly analogue composition, recalling Minimalist and Post-minimalist aesthetics. The code has been given an analogy to its origin. Their materiality and depicted corporeality not only points out that the digital has come into crisis, but with it our subject-object relations.

#### rites of passage: »THE HERO IS DEAD. LONG LIVE THE THING«<sup>65</sup>

The tangible shift in Baremboym and her contemporaries' sculptures from the symbolic to the indexical, from the code to the trace, and from subject to object, postulates a novel condition of materiality and corporeality. As my study revealed, this new understanding is, on one hand, deeply tied to our moment of contemporaneity. Baremboym and her peers' abject objects reflect and address our (inter)networked realities, where the physical and digital can no longer be conceived as dis-

60 Alice Channer quoted in Archey 2013b, p. 41.

61 Stakemeier 2014, p. 177.

62 See Lyotard 1985, p. 159.

63 Lyotard quoted in Linker 1985, p. 105.

64 Stakemeier 2014, p. 168.

65 Steyerl 2010.

crete. Their permanent oscillation, transgressing subject-object distinctions, creates a new sensibility for today's hybridising society. On the other hand, this new conceptualisation of materiality and corporeality is deeply rooted in the past. Baremboym's objects witness a sublime synthesis between the ›sensuous‹ and ›technoid-digitised‹ artistic countercultures of the past. As their depiction of corporeality displays, the digital as a ›meta-medium‹ of our society has inscribed itself into production circles, distribution channels and artistic materials, but, first and foremost, in the physicality of our *own* bodies.<sup>66</sup>

As the art works suggest, we are indeed becoming one with the pixel.<sup>67</sup> Our anthropocentric worldviews are thereby significantly challenged. In this line of argument, which is echoed in Steyerl's call for us to finally accept the death of the subject, or ›the hero‹, and to embrace the forces stored within ›things‹, the poignant question of the consequences for us is sidelined.<sup>68</sup> Acknowledging the crisis-based and poignant vision of the ›fractal subjects‹ in Baremboym and her coevals' sculptures, I would like to conclude by emphasising their moment of passage.<sup>69</sup> This rite of passage symbolises the ›death of the hero‹ and the birth of the thing.<sup>70</sup>

In his book *Les rites de passage* (1908), Dutch anthropologist Arnold van Gennep examines ritual events, or what he calls ›life crises‹, that mark a person's transition from one status to another, accompanied by ceremonies.<sup>71</sup>

Although Western societies have abandoned many of the practices accompanying such changes of life, it proves fruitful to use Gennep's framework to see the moment of contemporaneity in the artistic works of Baremboym and her peers. In this light, the transformative aspect in their sculptures, pointing towards an ontological shift, coincides with the transitional phase. This is described by the anthropologist as a phase, when the individual exists in a liminal or ›threshold‹ state.<sup>72</sup> The human condition shining through in these sculptures may lend them the power to act as a form of passage, where, as literary critic Stephen Greenblatt writes:

66 Stakemeier 2014, p. 176.

67 See Steyerl quoted in Bishop 2013, p. 38.

68 Steyerl 2010.

69 See Baudrillard 1989.

70 Steyerl 2010.

71 Gennep 2004, p. 20.

72 Steyerl 2010.

Something is extinguished, something becomes extinct: if not you yourself, in your bodily being, then something you are, a status or position in which you have been fixed, from which you have drawn your identity, to which you referred your experiences in order to give them some coherence and meaning.<sup>73</sup>

The works by Baremboym, Channer, Domanoviç, Deshayes, and Rosenkranz become a *mise-en-scène* of that indeterminate zone between digital and corporeal, between human and post-human, and between subject and object.

Emphasising the condition of fragmentation, the crisis, and the dissolution of these objects, one could argue with Julia Kristeva, pointing towards their purifying quality, typical of a rite of passage.<sup>74</sup> Looking at these works, spectators are left here with two possible ways to react. They can repress the experienced crisis and wonder about the artistic significance of these sculptures, or they can recognise their strangeness. In the latter case, they see their own regression, their own abjection, and start understanding the transformative gestures and potentials of these art works. In this light, it is important not to confuse the need for caution articulated here with despair, resentment or nihilism. In making us experience a moment of crisis, Baremboym and her contemporaries' objects help us to understand our world and bodies as contingent and about to be altered. While these artistic views do indeed invoke the death of the human subject, it is only the death of the subject seen within an anthropocentric horizon, and not the death of humanity. In the seemingly nihilist suspension of any meaning, we are therefore confronted with possibilities for its recovery. The ›dead hero‹ cannot help but wonder: When Lyotard's *Les Immatériaux* marked the dawn of post-modernity, do these works, which foreshadow a new era, consequently herald its end?

73 Greenblatt 1995, p. 28.

74 See Kristeva 1995, p. 23.

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