

After Practice
Thinking through Matter(s) and
Meaning Relationally

Volume I

Edited by the Laboratory: Anthropology of
Environment | Human Relations



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Volume II

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For
Stefan Beck

Foreword

Stefan Beck died unexpectedly on the 26th of March 2015. We dedicate these two volumes to him and his work. He would have hated that. We know. Too much attention to two things he really did not like to see foregrounded: himself and his work, grappling with a relational anthropology, grappling with the Institute of European Ethnology at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, and grappling with us – his co-laborators in the STS Lab as it was then called.

We could not let you go without a gathering of friends and intellectual partisans though. So we are offering you a deal: About a third of this book is about you. It is a selection of essays that keep surfacing in our discussions and that we care about. We have no idea whether a peer review process would select these as your most important texts. We could not care less. We find them exceptionally good to think with and we believe many others do too. The other two thirds are looking forward. We asked the authors – all of whom share fond memories with you – to take your pieces as starting points to let their minds wander: outside of strict academic conventions, enjoying a stroll through uncharted territories, taking cues from current affairs and wondering about what is to come.

OK, it is not the best deal for you. Well spotted. Of course, many of the authors could not stop themselves from thinking and writing about you. So, really, most of what makes up these two volumes is about you. Take it as a compliment, old chap, and get on with it! We certainly will – continue to miss you and think with you.

We thank the authors of these two volumes and everyone else who has contributed either through writing, reviewing, editing, copy-editing and type-setting, or through intellectual, moral, legal or emotional support over the last three years.

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 9th of August 2018
Laboratory: Anthropology of Environment | Human Relations

Introduction | After Practice. Thinking through Matter(s) and Meaning Relationally | Jörg Niewöhner¹

Origins and Transformations

We have to apologise. Taking our cue from Marilyn Strathern's contribution to the Lewis Henry Morgan lecture series *After nature* can only be considered pretentious (Strathern 1992). Her careful analysis of kinship and ways of partially knowing relations through situated models has transformed social and cultural anthropology both with regard to kinship studies and to anthropological epistemology more generally. While we share the concerns articulated in the multiple meanings of ›after nature‹, our aims in this volume are far more modest. We try to appreciate some of the recent discussions within and around socio-material theories of practices to which Stefan Beck contributed so substantially and ask how they might disturb our comfort zones opening up new avenues of thought in conjunction with new fields of research.

After practice within the context of a relational anthropology (Beck 2008) affords at least two avenues of enquiry: Firstly, the preposition ›after‹ alerts us to temporal contexts. It marks an event in time and we try to give contours and concern to its successors. The ›practice turn‹ in anthropology marks such an event. The analysis of »organized spatial-temporal manifolds of human activity« (Schatzki 2010, 129) has established itself as an important set of knowledge practices within ethnographic enquiry. Indeed, this thought style has furnished the intersections of anthropology, science and technology studies and feminist critiques so successfully that questions about its thin simplifications (Scott 1998, Niewöhner 2014a) have become pertinent. We discuss some of these below and thus wonder what may come *after practice theory*. We add, however, that ›after‹ does not mark a radical break. We see no need. Rather we read ›after‹ in the sense of ›post-‹: as marking an acknowledgement of, continuous entanglement with and critical diffraction of what has gone before. None of the contributions to this volume break with the major accomplishments of post-structuralism, constructionism and material-semiotic practice. Yet they explore whether challenging facets of it – the crucial notions of ethics (Landecker/Kelty)², truth (Boyer) and experience (Mol), for example – may lead to something interesting.

Secondly, and continuing the previous argument, ›after‹ alerts us to relations, origins and transformations: to »what is constructed ›after‹ a fact« (Strathern 1992, 2). In Strathern's case, after ›nature‹ refers to the implicit and often reified

›natural‹ notions of kinship that are an object of research in themselves, but – perhaps more importantly – that are woven into anthropological theory particularly in an anthropology-at-home. Reconfigure relations, Strathern teaches us, to understand the multiple ways in which kinship models are constructed after ›nature‹ and how that process has implicated anthropology from the start. Of course, many would argue today that ›nature [is] modelled on culture understood as practice‹ (Rabinow 1992, 99). This echoes the Strathernian analytical sentiment, but it adds another layer of complexity. It is not only the construction ›after the fact‹ that has been multiplied, but also its point of reference itself: nature as ›really real‹. Paul Rabinow had biotechnology in mind when he wrote his visionary and fiercely ironic piece against sociobiology in 1992. Yet, multi-naturalism is coming to us also through thoroughly decolonised ontology (cf. Viveiros de Castro 2012). ›After natures‹ challenges the notion of reification as a critical tool, because it questions origins not only epistemologically but also ontologically, if one continues to care about this distinction.³ The response of ethnographic enquiry, however, can only be Strathernian: relentless relationality.

In the same way that Strathern enquires into modes of relating that emerge from increasingly uncertain natures, we enquire into environment|human entanglements that emerge from the increasingly uncertain nature of the everyday: after practice. A key analytical concern of practice theory, particularly once moved beyond Bourdieu, Giddens and other scholars of a first wave of practice theory (cf. Ortner 1984), has been the tension between creativity and routine: How do processes of social ordering enable uncertain and contingent practices, experiences and meanings to sediment out into layers of seemingly self-evident practical sense and truth? With ›after practice‹ we sensitise our ethnographic optics to attend to fields and situations, where this self-evidentness is being unsettled and where this unsettling is turned productive together with and through ethnographic theorising. The impulse for this unsettling may come in a very unmediated sense from our research fields, for example, in the very acute figuration of fake news and post-truth in the United States, in which clear distinctions between knowledge and opinion are disturbed more or less deliberately and strategically. This has a very openly political dimension with a capital ›P‹ in that it radically alters the way truth speaks to power (Boyer). Yet it also manifests after a series of translations in the subpolitics of urban everyday life affecting technologies of the self and body-biographical protocols (Kaschuba). Entangling geo- and biopolitical modes of governance, as in the case of everyday life and biomedical knowledge and technology in Cyprus (Welz), the unsettling of the everyday reveals its enormous potential: for opening up unexpected futures, for creating spaces for politicised altruism (Beck 2002, 2011b), and for forms of materialised and embodied forms of hoping (Hauer et al. 2018).

In other cases, the research field may produce knowledge that appears innocuous at first glance and that only unfolds unsettling forces through