

The Art of Inquiry: Overcoming the Fixation on the New Materialisms

Daniela Kato

Hiroshima Jogakuin University, Japan

Elizabeth Hallam, and Tim Ingold, eds., *Making and Growing: Anthropological Studies of Organisms and Artefacts* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 244 pp.



In recent years, ecocriticism has become enthralled by a slew of “new materialisms.” An ever-growing literature heralds “material ecocriticism” as a new paradigm and sets out to trace the artistic and cultural expressions of views that have been put forward across a range of disciplines in the natural and social sciences, and revolving around concepts such as matter, agency, agentic matter, human and nonhuman agencies, agentic capacities, agentic powers, agentic forces, or narrative agencies (Iovino and Oppermann). While many may see here a coming of age of ecocriticism, there are pitfalls in this theoretical turn. Its intention to do away with the conceptual boundaries and dualistic perspectives that have underpinned modern western thought – mind and body, culture and nature, among others – as well as its spirit of interdisciplinarity are, no doubt, praiseworthy. And yet, it problematically leaves unchallenged one formidable boundary: that between theory and practice.

The anthropologist Tim Ingold, referring to what he sees as a disturbing trend in material culture studies, provides an illuminating description of the logic behind this theory-speak. It is worth quoting the description at length as a starting point for the discussion that follows:

It works like this. From the things that surround you, first abstract some aspect that they all have in common. Next, turn this abstraction into a quality of something yet more abstract, and then imagine that this meta-abstraction is concretely and plurally present in the world, instantiated in the very things from which the whole process of abstraction started in the first place. Thus, beginning with the substantive notion of “matter” as that which is inherent in all things, we move very quickly to “material” as a qualifying aspect of some greater totality such as “culture” or even “the world,” which is then promptly converted into a quality in its own right, “materiality,” only to be pluralized as multiple “materialities” concretely instantiated in the things we started from. By the same token, real-world actions are supposed to betoken some common agency, which is then played out in the guise of multiple “agencies.” So it is that in theory-speak, actors’ bread-and-butter engagements with ordinary stuff become . . . mutually constitutive encounters between subjective agencies and objective materialities. Needless to say, nothing is added by way of substance, and a great deal is lost by way of comprehensibility, by these tendentious reformulations. (“Comment” 314)

To overcome this “reification of hyperabstraction,” as he calls it, Ingold urges us to proceed instead in the opposite direction, by grounding theory in a practical engagement with the actual stuff that things are made of: materials. For it is in this return to materials, and not in reformulations of unfathomable concepts like materiality, materialisms, or agency, that, in his view, the genuine paradigm shift lies. And it is,

indeed, in this direction that Ingold's own work has consistently moved over the past decade, through an engagement with the practices of those sentient practitioners who share a familiarity with materials, their affordances, stories and transformations. By materials he means anything with intrinsic properties that enable or constrain specific paths of *becoming* in the environment: stone; wood, bark, sap, ash, paper and charcoal; wool; hides and leather; glass; textiles and baskets; pottery; dyes, pigments and paints – the inventory is virtually inexhaustible. And *becoming* means here the intertwined processes of growing and making by which human and nonhuman beings and things alternately come into existence, carry on, and pass out of existence.

But who are those sentient practitioners? In his most recent single-authored book, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (2013), Ingold contrasts the proverbial theorist that “does his thinking in his head, and only then applies the forms of thought to the substance of the material world” to the way of the craftsman and the practising artist, which is “to allow knowledge to grow from the crucible of our practical and observational engagements with the beings and things around us” (6). To align ourselves with their “art of inquiry” is to allow our thought to go along in a forward, improvisatory movement, and continually answer to the fluxes and flows of the materials with which we work; it is not to describe the world, nor to represent it, but rather to open up our perception to what is going on there so that we, in turn, can respond to and *correspond* with it (7). This correspondence with the world is all too often hindered by the prevalent means of communication within the academy, which do not favour direct experience, nor provide much scope for the unsettling of disciplinary certainties and their conventional boundaries by creative practices and knowledges-in-the-making.

Tim Ingold's latest book collaboration with Elizabeth Hallam, *Making and Growing*, delves further into a multitude of “arts of inquiry” to tackle the lacunae and biases of mainstream studies of material culture. In its critique of the overriding concern with apparently finished objects—artefacts—and what happens to them in their use and circulation that still dominate such studies, the book is a sequel to their first collaboration, *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation* (2007). Back then, Ingold and Hallam proposed a fundamental shift from this concern with artefacts and consumption to the creativity of the productive processes that bring the artefacts themselves into being, through a double focus on the generative currents of the materials in which they are immersed and the sensory awareness of the practitioners. *Making and Growing* takes several steps further in this direction. Like the previous collection, it is not an easy read for those who are not familiar with Ingold's work and his brilliantly unsystematic, accretive style of exposition. This review essay aims, in part, to provide some leads, while it also hopes to remain responsive to the book's form.

The eleven contributions that make up the collection engage in analyses of the relations between making and growing, and between artefacts and organisms, in the work of anatomists, biomedical engineers, medical educators and museum conservators, but also in everyday working practices—the abovementioned arts of inquiry—such as pottery, sewing, gardening, carving, glass-forming, and basket weaving. The

perspectives informing the analyses are manifold, ranging from anthropology and archaeology to geography and cultural history, and integrating various approaches to research: ethnography, archival research, apprenticeship and skilled practice, as well as experimental investigation, in line with recent collaborations between artists and anthropologists “in the field.” Three significant threads run through the essays, and they all bear the unmistakable mark of Ingold’s work: materials—their qualities and histories, plus their entanglements with the skills and affects of their practitioners; bodies—human and nonhuman, living and dead, but always relational; and temporality—the different time scales that inflect the material contexts where the processes of making and growing unfold.

Yet it is the engrossing Introduction by Ingold and Hallam that truly sets the collection on fire. Their introductory notes take us on a journey that rethinks and reprioritizes some of the key concepts and dichotomies that have underpinned modern western ways of thinking and shaped their ontologies and discursive orders. The starting point is disarmingly simple but has far-reaching implications:

Rather than just standing over nature and effecting a change, from a seemingly raw to a completed or “artefactual” state, makers of every profession appear to stand at a threshold, in amongst the stuff and tackle of their trade, easing the way for their ever-varying, protean material to pass from one form of life to another. Clay passes from earth-life to life as a pot, wood from arboreal life to living room, skin from animal shank to human hand and willow from bed to basket. (*Making and Growing 2*)

Growers, too, ease the way for the growth of their things:

Growing plants, for example, is a matter of ensuring the adequate provision of nutrients and water, and eliminating competition from weeds [...]. To grow wool one must see the needs of sheep, principally for pasture and for protection against predators and parasites. To grow silk entails unremitting labour in keeping the worms supplied with the only food they eat, namely mulberry leaves, and removing excrement. (3)

A sense of all these processes as care and nourishment emerges from such a way of seeing things, leading to an ontological reversal whereby growing is the very ground of becoming from which the forms of the so-called “artificial” take place. Making, too, is growing: “we do not grow because we have made, but we make and have made because we grow, that is because we are growers [...]. Only if we are capable of growing, only then can we make” (5). This amounts as well to a rethinking of the entrenched discourse on “nature and nurture,” in which nurture is posited as the projection of pre-existent cultural form upon “natural” material, as the very notion of anthropomorphism implies—for example, when a potter imposes a form onto clay to make a pot. What Ingold and Hallam suggest is that we think instead of culture as “the sum of emergent properties of a nurturing process,” coining the word “anthropo-ontogenetic” to describe “how form, rather than being applied to the material, is emergent within the field of human relations” (5). From this perspective, in the same way that the potter’s hands stroke the clay, human hands caress and cradle a baby: “all this handling, this nurturance, gives rise to the form of the pot, just as it does to that of the growing baby” (5).

This “making-in-growing”, or “growing-in-making,” dissolves the boundaries between organisms and artefacts, between generation and production, and between nature and culture. Ingold and Hallam move on to explain that such fuzzy boundaries were actually in operation in pre-modern and early modern European practices such as chambers of wonder in which the wealthy housed their precious objects and materials, as well as in casts from life that had the appearance of products of nature, and in witchcraft practices that presupposed connections between the bodies of human beings, animals and plants, and between artefacts and substances. Yet, with the gradual and complex emergence of modern science and its methods of knowledge systematization, the boundaries between making and growing came to be increasingly redefined and reinforced. The consequences of this historical division can be seen up to this day in museum collecting and display practices, alongside university disciplines and their divisions of academic labour.

But if recent decades have witnessed renewed challenges to these divisions between making and growing, artefacts and organisms—in domains ranging from contemporary art to biomedicine and materials science—in Ingold’s and Hallam’s view mainstream expositions of materiality have yet to effectively catch up with such challenges. This is because they still privilege artefacts over life-forms, leaving “a gaping void so far as non-human life is concerned” (16), even when they extend the attribution of agency to non-humans as well. And for the editors of *Making and Growing*, the problem lies, precisely, in framing the issues around the concept of agency. This requires a brief detour to Ingold’s previous work.

Over the past years, particularly in his books *Being Alive* (2011) and *Making* (2013), Tim Ingold has engaged in a sustained critique of the concept of agency and its wide currency in academic accounts of materiality, in the wake of the works of Bruno Latour—concerning human and non-human agency within hybrid networks comprising entities like computers, bacteria and plants—and of Alfred Gell, with reference to agency in relations between persons and material objects. Ingold’s main contention is that the entire question of agency lies on a false premise: that matter is inert and can only be *re-animated* by adding to it a “sprinkling” of agency. But if we remove from matter the dead hand of “materiality,” and, instead, conceive matter as *things*—that is, particular interweavings of materials in movement, including humans and nonhumans—then an extraneous “agency” becomes unnecessary, as things reveal themselves to us “not as quiescent objects but as hives of activity, pulsing with the flows of materials that keep them alive.” The way to go is thus to restore things to the generative fluxes of the world of materials in which they came into being and continue to subsist—“things are in life rather than life in things” (*Being Alive* 29). Against the grain of standard accounts of materiality, things do not possess agency but are rather possessed by *action*. What we need therefore, Ingold argues, is “a theory not of agency but of life,” because “the generativity of action is that of animate life itself, and lies in the vitality of its materials” (*Making* 97).

Ingold and Hallam take up this line of argument in *Making and Growing*, by asserting that “the theoretical resort to the concept of agency is a by-product of the

subsumption of growth under making, and with it, the suppression of animate life” (17). The key challenge they propose is that we reverse our ontological priorities and subsume thereby not only making under growth, but also agency under animacy, embodiment under ontogenesis, and being under becoming. The contributors to the collection have much to say about this—their essays constitute unassuming, practically grounded but no less compelling explorations of such a reversal process.

Object lessons, in sum, of which ecocritics in thrall to the new materialisms should take heed. Even if this means adopting a more modest stance, or perhaps risking their own irrelevance by moving beyond images and representations, so as to listen more closely to what practising artists and craftsmen have to say about how they grow their forms into existence.

Works Cited

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