

[Interview with Iris van der Tuin](#)

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Iris van der Tuin was interviewed by Andrew Iliadis. December 28th, 2014

Iris van der Tuin is Associate Professor of Gender Studies and Philosophy of Science in the Graduate Gender Programme of Utrecht University, the Netherlands. Some of her recent publications are *The Subject of Rosi Braidotti: Politics and Concepts* with B. Blaagaard (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* with R. Dolphijn (Open Humanities Press, 2012), and *Generational Feminism: New Materialist Introduction to a Generative Approach* (Lexington Books, 2014). She is chair of the EU-funded COST Action *New Materialism: Networking European Scholarship on 'How Matter Comes to Matter'* (2014-2018).

Thank you for agreeing to do this interview. Can you tell us a little about yourself and your philosophical orientation? Who were some of the people who influenced you?

I was born in the north of the Netherlands in 1978 and have been living in Amsterdam since 1996. I studied Women's Studies and Philosophy of Science at the University of Amsterdam after which I relocated to Utrecht University in order to do my PhD research in the field of Feminist Epistemology under the guidance of Prof. Rosi Braidotti. In Amsterdam, Women's Studies was infused with leftist politics and anarchism / the squat movement *and* with a very clear take on the feminist past as alive and lively. Especially the latter was perfect for me: as a young girl raised by Baby boomer parents who had said good-bye to institutions, a random encounter with the literary and political work of Dutch second-wave feminist Anja Meulenbelt (a kind of Kate Millet) had changed my life. First her work as such and later feminism in general provided some ground for me to stand on. I learned about the possibility to have a perspective on things and work from that emergent perspective, which also allowed me to re-evaluate my parents' world view (it turned out to be leftist, radically non-conformist, socially mobile, centered around humor, and slightly introverted). Utrecht University was and is a parade of role models of the local, national, and international kind. Important are those moments of the generations coming together; I.e., when my peers and I get to bring scholars to Utrecht who then have conversations with the older colleagues and the younger students. I think of events with Profs. such as Vicki Kirby, Karen Barad, Claire Colebrook, Sara Ahmed, Susan Stryker, Barb Bolt, Estelle Barret, and Katie King.

What is "generational feminism," and is it related to feminist epistemology?

Generational feminism is what I stand for and how I hope to structure my classes, the events I help organize, and the texts I write. I hope to bring to the fore the aliveness and liveliness of second-wave feminism and today's feminisms' conversations with the feminist past as a 'virtual past' (Bergson). My standpoint is: the futures of the feminist past have not become true, so their dreamed futures are still worth fighting for or worth revisiting as search lights for contemporary feminist politics. We do not live in post-patriarchy! This fact impacts men, women, and trans people alike. The relationship of such generational feminism has epistemological ramifications given the models of continuity and of transformation it relies on. Most feminist epistemologies are firmly based in a logic of conflict: feminist standpoint theory is not a feminist empiricism or a feminist postmodernism, and it is also not correct to link French bodily materialists to feminist standpoint theory (although both are

materialist feminisms). I argue that classifications of ideas (feminist or not) are always excessive. My favorite feminist text is therefore Donna Haraway's 1988 article 'Situated Knowledges'. She argues: "bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes. Their *boundaries* materialize in social interaction. Boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; 'objects' do not preexist as such. Objects are boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within; boundaries are very tricky. What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies. Siting (sighting) boundaries is a risky practice" (Haraway 1988, 594; emphasis in original).

What are some of the challenges facing Feminist Studies today?

The biggest challenge facing feminist academia today is, in my opinion, the speed of the contemporary university, whether corporatized or neoliberal or indicated by any other denominator. This speed, combined with the dispersed nature of academic work/ers today and with the inclination of feminists to respond to their institutional context in unprecedented ways (see also Joan W. Scott's analysis in her 2011 book *The Fantasy of Feminist History*), leads to sometimes-judgmental forms of feminist theorizing (see the discussion in *European Journal of Women's Studies* following Sara Ahmed's 2008 Open Forum essay on feminist new materialisms and especially Noela Davis' 2009 response which slowly unpacks Ahmed's accusations) and to the rapid implementation of new terms in feminist research and even entire bodies of knowledge, or activist practices, to feminist classrooms. An example of the latter is the new concept of 'microaggressions' which is as much in vogue in feminist and LGBTQ research today as it is on blogs and the Internet. Especially from a feminist new materialist perspective I wonder whether we have the tools to research microaggressions, to make researchable the implied jump from the unconscious gathering of imperceptible, identity-related aggressions directed at a person to a person's conscious awareness of these violations of the self. I wonder if these processes haven't been made into an abstract scholarly concept too fast, and what the risks are if my intuition proves to be true. To what extent have we taken the time to develop microaggressions research in the light of research into for example 'everyday racism' (think of Philomena Essed)? How has that concept been operationalized, with which success rate, and how can we build bridges? These are questions I work on with junior colleagues as Laura Baams and Aggeliki Sifaki. I have similar concerns about the swift implementation of 'trans studies' in European academia, given that, whereas Susan Stryker's and Aren Z. Aizura's amazing *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* was published in 2013, the 'hub' of trans studies at the University of Arizona is only slowly unfolding. How is it possible that the topic or the theory is nowadays taught at so many universities world-wide? Does it matter that 'gender' comes from US academia and that some European feminist programs work with 'sexual difference'? In the light of the examples here given - and let me stress that they are just examples and that I am highly committed to contribute collegially to their slow unpacking - I keep on arguing that the implementation of 'intersectionality' at many European universities is an ongoing process, whereas the term was coined *in 1989*. Critical race studies could not be transposed to European contexts without a retraining of European feminist scholars, a retraining in terms of feminist scholars' implication in the questions the field raises, and in terms of how we might want to, or *have to*, deal with 'race' in Europe. This retraining is still ongoing. What kind of conceptual tool does a European location require, and what do we bring to critical race studies and the intersectionality concept? The same goes for the examples I brought up: I need a slower unpacking of microaggressions and trans, and generational cooperation instead of a 'generation war' (Julia Serano's 2014 term).

What areas of Feminist scholarship require more attention? Where should feminist research turn to?

I think what needs further attention are the terms of our own research, as can be gleaned from my answer to the previous question. Sometimes feminist new materialisms, or the current theoretical moment as such, is termed an 'ontological turn' in feminist studies. I want to stress the necessity to keep an eye on epistemology, on the epistemological implications of the latest ontological insights, which I do not want to brush under the carpet at all, and on the ways in which ontological turnings are actually made.

What is the "performative turn" in art? You also call attention to "affective" and "material" turns.

The performative turn in feminist studies has gotten glued to the work of Judith Butler whose *Gender Trouble* from 1990 has done amazing work in the international community of women's, gender, sexuality, and feminist scholars. I am also interested in drawing up connections with Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* which, as early as 1979, stressed performativity for academia as a whole as much as Butler does so for feminist scholars. Of course, Lyotard was well aware of identity politics and the necessity to develop social constructivist rather than biologically determinist arguments about identity. To me texts like Gregg Lambert's 2001 *Report to the Academy (re: The New Conflict of Faculties)* and Jon McKenzie's *Perform, or Else: From Discipline to Performance* from the same year are essential readings on performativity, scholarship, and the link with activism, art, technology, and bureaucracy. Pushing *The Postmodern Condition* to the extreme just like *The Postmodern Condition* pushes the 1970s moment to the extreme, Lambert and McKenzie reach conclusions similar to Sara Ahmed's unforgettable analysis of the installation of diversity policies at UK universities published in 2007 in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* under the title, a quote from one of her interviewees, "You end up doing the document rather than doing the doing". What this boils down to is the free-floating nature of some performativity theories and practices. McKenzie calls the situation we are in 'the performance stratum' in which we cannot see anymore that man is the measure of all things as subjectivity has been obscured (e.g. by theories of distributed subjectivity granting human-like subjectivity to things or - if I may add - by theories that attempt to do away with subjectivity altogether...).

The affective turn is harder for me to respond to as 'affect' does wonderful re-grounding work in the light of the performance stratum (see for example Bettina Papenburg's and Marta Zarzycka's 2013 edited collection *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imaginary and Feminist Politics*) and adds to the obscurantist move reported above (see e.g. Ruth Leys' hilarious 2011 article "The Turn to Affect: A Critique"). I am more familiar with the material turn as a turn that is not so much related to the speculative turn (of which Object-Oriented Ontology is part) albeit that they share an impetus. Let me quote from my article 'Diffraction as a Methodology for Feminist Onto-Epistemology: On Encountering Chantal Chawaf and Posthuman Interpellation' published recently in *Parallax*:

"New materialisms and OOO can be theorized as two current actualizations of the desire to think without presupposing dualist structures such as subject and object, word and world, nature and culture. In the words of [Stacy] Alaimo:

[Feminist new materialist] models scramble conventional notions of subjectivity that separate the

rational human from an external environment. Instead, the posthuman being is entangled with the very stuff of the world. [...] We could, as [object-oriented ontologists], wonder what it would be like to 'be' a plastic bag or a plastic bottle cap. Or, we could consider the networks of chemistry, capitalist consumerism, inland waterways, ocean currents, and addiction to high fructose corn syrup that have created the Great Pacific Garbage patch.

Both traditions strive towards cutting across the Kantian deeming impossible of reaching the Thing-in-Itself. According to OOOers, Kant's mind-dependence must be eliminated in order to move beyond 'correlationism'. They claim that the Thing-in-Itself possesses its own logic (hence, the ontological turn). New materialists argue that even rationally intuiting a Thing-in-Itself is preceded by embodied encounters, so they do not leave the human subject behind, but speak of the entangled nature of knowing and being ('onto-epistemology' references 'the study of practices of knowing in being'). It is argued that 'representationalisms' cannot do justice to this entanglement. Whereas the two *actualizations* of contemporary theory originate from *the same virtual stem*, they are conflictual."

Are there any areas in Gender Studies or Philosophy that you think require more attention?

Right now, and in spite of growing antinomies like the one reported above, I consider the current moment in both Gender Studies and Philosophy to be very productive. I thoroughly enjoy transversal publications such as Katerina Kolozova's 2014 *Cut of the Real: Subjectivity in Poststructuralist Philosophy*, which is from a Gender Studies point of view a re-reading of Butler with an unusual but fascinating foreword of François Laruelle. I am extremely excited by the attention given to Alfred North Whitehead and Henri Bergson, and cannot wait until for instance Jeffrey T. Nealon's plant theory monograph or Jean-Michel Rabaté's cartographical exercise *1922: Literature, Culture, Politics* will come out!

Can you say a little bit about the "new materialism" project and the material turn in the humanities more generally?

Well, as a follow up of the publication of *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* which I did with Rick Dolphijn and of lots of other work that is coming out in Europe around what my colleague Ann-Sophie Lehmann calls 'the 4Ms' of matter, materials, materiality, and materialism, I have applied for European funding for the networking of this work that is currently burgeoning but also terribly dispersed. Colleagues Milla Tiainen, Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, Ilona Hongisto, Felicity Colman, Jussi Parikka, Cecilia Åsberg, Hannah Meissner, Marie-Luise Angerer, Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer, and I have developed the research question 'how do European new materialisms look and what can they innovate?' which is not to assume that new materialisms are a European phenomenon but that there is a specific situation - the European research area - that allows for asking these kinds of questions, getting funding for the answering of them, and making sure that as many scholars from the EU and neighboring countries benefit from the funding and contribute to the process of generating provisional answers. Currently we work around the themes of genealogies of new materialisms, the traversing of natural sciences and humanities, the creative arts, and economic and organizational experiments. It is great to see how many different kinds of scholars recognize their work as new materialist and I am very enthusiastic about the debates we are allowed to have.

What is special about Continental philosophy in terms of thinking the material turn?

In *New Materialism* Rick and I developed a strong sense of the material turn being a *rewriting* of modern and postmodern traditions of thought, a turning that is *affirmative* of what these traditions have produced and not radically negative or dismissive. This is another instance of the speculative turn differing from the material one, since, for instance, Quentin Meillassoux, on page 37 of *After Finitude*, radically takes his distance from “the Leibnizian monad; Schelling’s nature, or the objective subject-object; Hegelian Mind; Schopenhauer’s Will; the Will (or Wills) to Power in Nietzsche; perception loaded with memory in Bergson; Deleuze’s Life, etc.” The new materialist scholars are more invested in finding innovative entry points to these oeuvres and more. I think of the work of Kirby who has developed an innovative Saussureanism in *Telling Flesh* (1997) and an innovative Derrideanism in *Quantum Anthropologies* (2011). It is for this reason that work such as Kyoo Lee’s 2012 *Reading Descartes Otherwise: Blind, Mad, Dreamy, and Bad* and her developing re-reading of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* are new materialist projects to me.

What can new materialism offer to Women’s and Gender studies?

New materialism offers many things to feminist scholarship, for one thing because its parameters generate such a lively debate (a debate existing alongside many other lively debates!). In particular, and this is my project in *Generational Feminism: New Materialist Introduction to a Generative Approach*, it is because of the ‘new’ of new materialism, which is not a progressive notation but rather a rewriting, that a certain non-conflictual logic of continuity and transformation is introduced to feminist scholarship. This allows for all those temporary standstills in the development of feminist thought, standstills that are usually neatly delineated and thereby fixated by feminist epistemologists in spite of the excessive nature of thought, to remain generative, “productive of meanings and bodies” to quote Haraway once more. In *Generational Feminism* I work explicitly with the etymology of ‘generation’ in order to make this point in a precise manner: ‘generation’ refers back to an etymological root indicating ‘generational classes’ as well as to a root indicating ‘to generate’. Once the Bergsonian method of dealing with dualisms is used, a method according to which a and not-a are both grafted on a, it becomes clear that ‘generational classes’ are also ‘generated’. Tapping into this generativity *for generational classes* has been the attempt I engaged with since my PhD research.

In your essay “The Ontological Force of Technicity” you offer a reading of Gilbert Simondon alongside Ernst Cassirer. What drew you to Simondon and what is the value in his philosophy?

I have written this article together with Aud Sissel Hoel, a colleague from Norway. When she and I were both visiting scholars at Harvard University’s History of Science Department, I remember sitting on a bench together watching boats and birds on the Charles River and Sissel telling me about her attempt at rewriting of Cassirer’s philosophy of technology. My response was: “This sounds like Simondon to me!” I read Cassirer, Sissel read Simondon, and before we knew it we were sitting at a kitchen table in Cambridge, MA working on one Google Document and with the methodology of diffractive reading. . .

You also claim in several places that you perform a “diffractive” reading (for example, between Simondon and Cassirer). Can you explain this method?

Diffractive reading is a methodology of reading texts ‘through’ one another. The method has its roots

in Haraway's 1992 article on Trinh Min-ha and the 'inappropriate/d Other'. Here the notion is introduced that a reflection on phenomena or texts is never enough for a feminist scholar working toward change as reflection keeps what is reflected on at a distance. Haraway therefore adds 'diffraction' to the toolbox of semiotics and it is precisely this notion that later on captured Karen Barad who we now know of her masterpiece *Meeting the Universe Halfway* from 2007. Barad has a famous example of reading Butler and Foucault - she ascribes a discursive bias to both of them - through the work of science studies scholars like Bruno Latour and Susan Leigh Star - we could say STS work is as bottom-up as affect theory and microaggression research is, leaving the reader behind with questions about how reflective statements then come about (in Simondonian terms: what is the threshold assumed, construed, or 'found' by these scholars?). 'Reading texts [as phenomena] through one another' is expressed very casually by Barad, but the implications are far-going. In my diffractive readings - of Cassirer&Simondon, Barad&Bergson, Whitehead&Snow, and so on - I have tried to systematize this methodology while doing justice to its performative nature. That is, I have just started reading diffractively and enjoying it!

What are you currently working on?

I am currently completing a manuscript on diffractive reading and, next to that, increasingly fascinated by the 1920s and how the 1920s are upcoming as a reference era in contemporary scholarship. It is in that light that I just leisurely read Sarah Waters' new novel *The Paying Guests*. But I have also engaged with the podcast *Serial* as a form of embodied and embedded investigative journalism. Can't wait till Season Two starts!

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