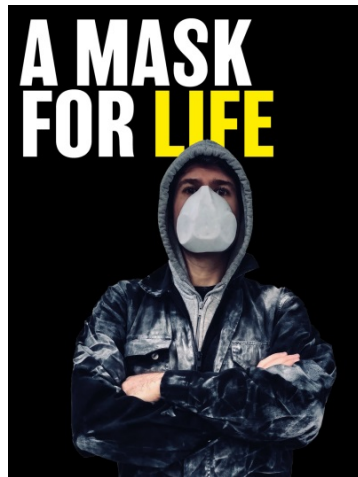


Body & Material Reinvented

Team Building by a research group in the arts during Covid19 times. Online and live experiences by Body and Material Reinvented, Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp (Belgium).

Body and Material Reinvented was established in 2015 when just a handful of researchers at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp were actively exploring and questioning artistic issues related to the (human) body and materials thanks to funded research projects¹. The underlying idea was to provide them with administrative and technical support, but even more to encourage this type of inquiries by offering a helping hand. Unlike the Academy's other research groups Thinking Tools, ArchiVolt and MaxLab, Body and Material Reinvented was not founded by a group of people connected through areas of interest in terms of artistic research. In its early years, "our" research group functioned rather as a collection of individuals who each independently explored their own subject. The mission and vision text was an overarching compilation or, if you like, the greatest common denominator of that variety of topics in the individual research projects we attracted: "**Body** stands for the human body, for the three dimensional and for corporeality in all its diversity e.g. sensory, humanity, and mobility ../.. **Material** refers to substantiality, to the more or less intensive materiality which is inherently present in each visual artwork; and in addition to construction, material structure, the pair materials and techniques ../.. Our concern focusses on how art that is closely involved with body and material can profile itself today within the tension between ethics and aesthetics? ../.. **Reinvented** refers to methodologies starting from experiment and coincidence"².



Some of the artistic research output by the first Body and Material Reinvented researchers – left to right: Anton Cotteleer at De Garage in Mechelen (Belgium); Athar Jaber A mask for life for United Nations Refugee Agency; Wim Wauman at Coup de Ville in Sint-Niklaas (Belgium).

Inspired by Richard Sennett among others, this fairly broad identity description was centred on reinvention and reappraisal of **craftsmanship and serendipity**³. Slowly but surely this appealed to more and more artists wanting to explore art related to body and matter. However, it became clear that, on the one hand, we offered research opportunities to a wide variety of people and their creative input in different ways; yet, on the other, we were unable to function as a group, let alone with an unambiguous identity of our own. In addition, we faced the dilemma between restricting our scope of action, partly for reasons of feasibility, and the risk of missing out on interesting, innovative projects as a result.

When, in 2019, the Research Council offered operational resources to each of its research groups through a “transition budget”, we seized the chance and the challenge: to initiate a team building process and define our common identity as a group. At the same time, the part-time one-woman staff of Body and Material Reinvented, who was hardly able to provide the necessary support to the many applicants and active researchers was strengthened by additional part-time workforce⁴. We wanted to encourage our researchers, who were working diligently on their own projects, to participate in a **group-building process** and worked out a proposal to that end. However, the Research Council rightly criticised us by asking to what extent it was or was not supported by the “target group”, which we could not answer. On Tuesday 10 December 2019, we therefore introduced the draft research application at a meeting to which all sixteen then active researchers were invited. The fact that almost everyone was present, testified to their interest and motivation in launching and belonging to a truly interconnected research group. Certainly, some people knew each other and had occasionally collaborated for e.g. a public presentation (*soup session*), bachelor class, master class or even a publication. However we honestly had not realized, or even dared to dream, that the need for cooperation was so urgent. We did not need to start an activation process; the intention was already there. So we were immediately one step ahead. Could it be that if you leave something dormant long enough it starts to ferment until it erupts like a volcano? That was pretty much the lively feeling after the meeting.

Three people among the attendees were chosen by consensus to set up a project that we decided to name “**Revising and connecting Body and Material Reinvented**”⁵. Quickly the view on and the approach of the group process became clear, as those present at the December meeting had given plenty of ideas and input. First of all, we all wanted to get to know one another and each other’s research better. Next, we wanted to examine within the group to whom in particular, in which fields and how we might establish collaborations. Convinced that we would be stronger together, more visible to the outside (artistic research) world we aimed to discover “what connects us and who we are as a group”. More specifically, the three collaborators were tasked with organising four activities: first, an internal seminar that we called “presentation day” to get to know each other; second, “a discussion day” to find our common grounds; third, an “excursion day” to mentally connect us as a group; finally, an “evaluation day” to summarise the results. The planning was done and just when our staff could start executing it, covid19 entered the society.



Some of the subjects shared by the researchers during the online Body and Material Reinvented “Presentation day” on 19 June 2020, left to right: by Roel Arkesteijn, Karel Tuytschaever, Anna Godzina, Bart Van Dijck, Lavinia Rossetti with Elisa Zupini.

“**Presentation day**” became the first challenge to materialise during the covid19 era. Like many, we initially turned a blind eye, rescheduling the timing more than once so that it could happen live in the auditorium of the M_HKA after the lockdown period, which was extended several times.

Each researcher was supposed to present a short lecture on a book, a video, or another referential source crucial to his/her/their individual research project. The audience was limited to the active members of Body and Material Reinvented; sixteen people altogether at that time. Besides the fact that one was not allowed to meet in group and certainly not in a closed auditorium, half of our group consisted of people who did not live permanently in Belgium, including the coach we had initially invited. We absolutely wanted to enable the participation of everyone involved so we finally decided to go digital with **online presentations**, even though it felt very different from a physical encounter. Yet this modus operandi also had its advantages, especially in terms of easier recording. On **19 June 2020** we all met for the entire day via Microsoft Teams. Everyone was given 15 minutes to speak. The lectures were grouped in thematic clusters – anticipating thematic connections between the various researchers. The chairwoman’s introductory speech not only reiterated the intentions of the day, but also introduced clear practical arrangements for its smooth running. E.g. while listening, the audience had to switch off microphones and cameras; comments were only allowed in the chat box; oral discussions postponed until the next event “discussion day”. Sufficient breaks ensured sufficient concentration, as we had previously found teleworking quite tiring.



Inauguration of the library installation the “Cocoonery of Pandora” by Wim Wauman on 27 September 2021 - photo © Wannas Cré.

A virtual environment allows quick adaptation e.g. for the exchange of documentation. All lectures were recorded and made available to the entire group on our newly established “private” Body and Material Reinvented **SharePoint**. Our team members were also invited and encouraged to upload personal CV’s, portfolios, investigation progress and results, which they did, thus providing basic documentation to discover each other’s areas of interest even better. Based on the lectures, comments and suggestions in the chat box on the presentation day, a Body and Material Reinvented **source list** too was compiled and made available on the SharePoint. It led to the idea of a bookshelf aiming at increasing our presence and visibility in the academy’s library.

This soon became an independent creative project. We involved the librarian, the research coordinator and the other research groups of the Academy. Multidisciplinary artist Wim Wauman developed the assignment and called it **the Cocoonery of Pandora**. It is now a permanent artistic installation/piece of furniture that promotes communication through a dynamic visualisation of research. We aim to interconnect with the entire Academy community through a lively exchange by sharing references, text, books, and films among other things. Moreover, this artistic installation embellishes our beloved library and at the time seemed an appropriate use to spend the remaining project budget. Events that were unfortunately forced to take place online, indeed turned out to be cheaper than organising live events.

On Monday [27 September 2021](#), this fascinating **library installation** was solemnly inaugurated in the presence of representatives of all research groups, the research coordinator, the librarian and photographer Wannes Cré for the visual documentation. For the occasion, Wim Wauman recited his *artist's statement*. It can be accessed both on the information panels in situ, executed by artist Adam Galach, and on the Academy's website⁶.



Participants at the Body and Material Reinvented Discussion day, from left to right: drs. Bart Van Dijck, Lies Vanassche, dr. Wim Wauman, Lavinia Rossetti, Elisa Zuppini, Adam Galach, coach dr. Vijai Patchineelam, Karel Tuytschaever, Roel Arkesteijn, dr. Ria De Boodt, drs. Anton Cotteleer, Valentine Kempynck, coach Adrijana Gvozdenovic, Vincent Van Dijck, Renata Lamenza, Stefania Assandri. Unfortunately the presence of drs. Andrea Cammarosana, Anna Godzina, dr. Athar Jaber and dra. Vivi Touloumidi was prevented by closed borders due to covid19 measures so that they could not participate - photo © Vijai Patchineelam.

The second planned activity was to explore and connect each other at a “**Discussion day**”, scheduled for [8 September 2020](#) as a live experience. Since it was summer, we expected and were encouraged to meet safely in person as a group. The summer forest bar (“Bosbar De Eekhoorn”) in the Kalmthoutse Heide nature reserve north of Antwerp proved a suitable, perfect open-air venue which we rented on its closing day⁷. Armed with face masks, hand gel, ideas, enthusiasm and even excitement we finally gathered in person. We were welcomed with an introduction on the purpose and planning of the day: to find our common grounds through discussion.

Adrijana Gvozdenovic, expert in group workshops, and ArchiVolt researcher Vijai Patchineelam were engaged as our mediators and documenters. Following the presentations made in June, they asked us all to watch the film *The World of Lygia Clark* (1973) beforehand. It turned out to be a relevant choice. During the morning session, we held a joint close reading of the text version and commented on striking passages. It led to interesting discussions about our identity as a group. The session was entirely recorded – with audio only, as that is less present and therefore less intimidating. For half an hour we also connected in a practice-based way with a relaxation workshop in nature, guided by dance expert Elisa Zuppini.

The healthy open-air lunch break supplied time to connect informally and to join the temporary performative installation by artist Valentine Kempynck. In the afternoon, we were split into three groups to perform a very specific task: in turn, each told about crucial issues in his/her/their research, while the others took notes. The mediators even suggested a speculative exercise in times of covid when nothing is certain anymore: imagining the different aspects for the future identity of the research group. By consensus, what each group thought they shared was written down. The “discussion day” was concluded as each group presented its “outcome” to the others in a more or less performative way, culminating in a corona proof group photo. By the way, we were lucky that the weather was perfect for a whole day outdoors. Afterwards, all text, visual and audio documents were posted on our SharePoint. They formed our guidelines for developing the new **mission and vision** statement.



Bart Van Dijck NGHTWLK.

The “**Excursion day**” and third part of our team building process was initially scheduled for [15 September 2020](#), a week away. Due to covid19, it had to be postponed several times, but despite this, people showed understanding and remained enthusiastic. The joint excursion was intended to strengthen the fairly young ties by travelling together to a destination meaningful to all. Suggestions led to a longlist and eventually we decided to visit to the Dutch university city of Leiden by public transport. We wanted to visit the museum of anatomy, Rijksmuseum Boerhaave; the botanical garden, the oldest in Western Europe; and the research centre for material culture suggested by our critical friends Nat Muller and Jean Bernard Koeman⁸. However, covid19 put another stop at this plan: it seemed irresponsible to travel in group by train across the Belgian border to the Netherlands.

Subsequently we decided to tap into our own potential and involvement in its individual projects. Our rituals specialist Bart Van Dijck was invited to come up with a proposal for a connecting group activity. He suggested organizing a **NGHTWLK** into the nature reserve at Kalmthout that gradually was becoming our second home base. The underlying idea was to experience the (almost) complete silence and darkness of the night while walking not alone but in the company of others. Lockdown periods, weather and season conditions were the cause that the night walk finally went ahead only on [15 February 2022](#). We met just before sunset when Bart brought us gradually into the right mood. Everyone had to collect both a branch useful as a walking stick and 28 twigs to tie them one by one to a rope, symbolizing the 28-day interval between two full moons. We walked for about three hours in snake with Bart at the head; and in silence not being allowed to talk. During the walk, we each ritually buried, one by one, something compostable that we were attached to but no longer needed or wanted to leave behind. As a finale we each passed a threshold barefoot and in silence made a firm promise to ourselves. It was amazing how the darkness and silence of the night connected us, even more compounded by the persistent rain.

Meanwhile, we had studied all the collected documentation and compiled it into a renewed **mission and vision statement**⁹. By no means everyone has enough experience and skills to write that kind of text, but every member was actively involved through the team-building process. Indeed, throughout this process, we have resolutely and deliberately chosen a basic democratic way of working. It was our wish and intention that our group identity for the near future should reflect that it has grown from the bottom up and is supported by each individual. Together, we laid the foundations of the new mission and vision, including critical assessments that were systematically reworked and lead to our identity definition and the research track we will hence explore. It has become clear that the Body and Material Reinvented research group wants to inspire, stimulate and support projects that reflect critical and sustainable attitudes, and that focus on meaningfulness, interconnectedness, embodiment and New Materialism.



Left: the performative installation presented by Valentine Kempynck on the Discussion day became the initial campaign image of the Body and Material Reinvented “Open Laboratory Weeks”- photo © Vijai Patchineelam – Right: next graphic designer and former Academy student Vitoria Damiani created and shaped our own recognizable Open Laboratory Weeks lay-out style.

The team-building process expanded so far that we decided to apply to the Research Council for not one, but a trilogy of projects. Our second joint project, “**Extending Body and Material Reinvented**”, aimed to prepare, organise, execute and document a semi-public event, and wanted to increase the visibility of the research group within the Academy, AP University College and the Antwerp Research Institute for the Arts (ARIA). This three-weeks event, called **Open Laboratory Weeks**, happened in the Academy’s “Lange Zaal” from **21 September to 8 October 2021**¹⁰. They consisted of a combination of workshops, exhibitions, live and online lecture series, debates and performances. All our researchers were actively involved, thus giving them the opportunity to develop studio practices together in an open laboratory setting. Interested artists, researchers, students, staff, alumni and the public were invited to participate. The entire programme was captured by professional photographer Wannes Cré and added to our SharePoint.

The debriefings held at the end of each *open laboratory week* showed the strong need for a regular, engaging and connecting activity. Shortly afterwards, on **28 October 2021**, Roel Arkesteijn and Vivi Touloumidi founded the Body and Material Reinvented **Reading Group**, intended as a permanent think-tank and contributor to the critical discourse of the academy¹¹. It still meets monthly (apart from school holiday periods) to discuss relevant and urgent literature, and is open to everyone interested. The first publication to be analysed chapter by chapter was Donna J. Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble*¹². A strongly related field trip to the exhibition *Critical Zones: observatories for Earthly Politics* in Karlsruhe, Germany, was set up¹³. From **March 2021** on Jane Bennett’s influential publication *Vibrant Matter* became the focus of analysis and discussion¹⁴. Another field trip to the *Botanischer Wahnsinn* exhibition in Otterlo, the Netherlands, was organised on **27 September 2022**¹⁵.



Open air evaluation at MIKA on 2 February 2022. Participants left to right: Karel Tuytschaever, Xuanlin Wang, Roel Arkesteijn, Michela dal Brollo, Bart Van Dijck, Anton Cotteleer, Stefania Assandri, Renata Lamenza, Anna Godzina, Sofie Renap, Ines Ballesteros, Ria De Boodt - Photos © Ria De Boodt.

Since the chronology of the “revising and connecting” project had got mixed up anyway, we decided to postpone its fourth and final part “**Evaluation day**” until after our *open laboratory weeks*. This way, we could include their evaluation in the round-up immediately. It happened at the open air café MIKA of the Antwerp Middelheimmuseum on **2 February 2022**. Those present, but also those who were unable to attend, gave oral and written comments and suggestions on the functioning of the research group. E.g. consequently, the commitment henceforth included organisational, material and publicity support for public research project-related events of our researchers, such as the academy’s *soup sessions*¹⁶.

Our third and, for now, final joint investigation project, “**Editing Body and Material Reinvented**” initially wanted to produce a printed publication with writings and visual documentation compiled by the researchers. This would have aimed to put our research group on the global map of artistic research. However, we soon decided to go for online distribution, via the academy website. We explicitly opted to highlight our research group through this website and not to overestimate ourselves with an independently developed website. Together with webmaster Lotte De Voeght, we are systematically reworking our weblink, both in terms of content and information, and visually in terms of design and accessibility. It became a fascinating work in progress.

In **conclusion**, Covid19 did not make for us in this team building process. It constantly appealed to our flexibility and creativity, which required a great deal of adaptability and energy. As often in times of crisis, we discovered the value of alternatives, thanks to our own group members too who showed themselves highly motivated, cooperative and inventive. Not to mention the digital communication possibilities that proved very useful. Not to forget nature as a very suitable location to connect and revise ourselves as a group.

30 September 2022 by dr Ria De Boodt, chair of Body and Material Reinvented from 2015 till 30 September 2022 and supervisor of the three team building research projects. This text was produced in close cooperation with Roel Arkesteijn, chairman from 1 October 2022 on.

Notes

¹ Alexandra VERSCHUEREN, *Doing Fashion Design. Auto ethnographic reflections in dialogue with architecture*, PhD, 2010-2015. Jorge MANILA, *Other Bodies*, PhD, 2013-2017. Athar Jaber, *Tracing Entropic Beauty*, 2-year project, 2015-2016. Anton Cotteleer, *The Skin of Sculpture*, 2-year project, 2015-2016. See: Els DE BRUYN & Johan PAS (eds.), *Art and/as Research at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp*, Antwerp, Jap Sam Books Track Report TR16/01, 2016, pp. 286, 292, 317-318.

² Extract from Body and Material Reinvented first vision and mission text 17 December 2015. See also: Ria DE BOODT "Body and Material Reinvented", in *Art and/as*, p. 157-158.

³ Richard SENNETT, *The craftsman*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008.

⁴ Since 1 April 2016 art historian dr. Ria De Boodt was employed 30%. Art historian Roel Arkesteijn became employed 20% from 15 September 2019 on.

⁵ Both artists Stefania Assandri and dr. Wim Wauman, and Roel Arkesteijn each were employed for 20% during 4 months. This combination reflected an identity aligned with our "fluctuant nature" by engaging two temporary researchers, and a staff member representing the continuous view.

⁶ <https://ap-arts.be/en/cocoonery-pandora>

⁷ <https://grensparkkalmthoutseheide.com/toegangspoort-de-vroente/>

⁸ <https://www.materialculture.nl/>

⁹ <https://ap-arts.be/en/researchgroup/body-and-material-reinvented>

¹⁰ <https://ap-arts.be/en/event/body-material-reinvented-open-laboratory-weeks>

¹¹ <https://ap-arts.be/reading-group-body-and-material-reinvented>

¹² Donna J. HARAWAY, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, first published by the Duke University Press in 2016.

¹³ The excursion happened on 15-16 December 2021, see: <https://zkm.de/en/exhibition/2020/05/critical-zones>

¹⁴ Jane BENNETT, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, published by Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2010.

¹⁵ Exhibition curated by Roel Arkesteijn, see: <https://krollermuller.nl/botanischer-wahnsinn>

¹⁶ 13 May 2022 *Stone Soup Session* by Ines Ballesteros and Michela dal Brollo. 16 May 2022 *Safe Soup Session* by Researcher(>1), Stefania Assandri, Renata Lamenza and guest Joonas Lahtinen. See: <https://ap-arts.be/en/soup-sessions>