

## MOLTEN: MATTER THROUGH TIME

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Philosophical thinking should not inform the core structure of a work of art, but when it helps nurture the practice of an artist, the outcomes often go beyond aesthetics. Where aesthetics opens up a space for exploring thoughts, feelings and perceptions that manifest in response to stimuli, philosophy helps us to question what they activate and mean in relation to our sense of place and time. The exhibition *Molten* reflects on the ways matter is perceived and understood throughout the transformations it undergoes, from the condition that characterises its existence into another.

The installation comprises an immersive environment filled with twenty tonnes of thermal sand. Visitors walk through a landscape of sand hills and amorphous pieces made from a melted version of the same material. Throughout the duration of the exhibition, the artist moulds the display material to transform the matter from its original state. Nicola Martini invites the audience to embark on a journey through the key issues that inform his artistic research: matter and the interstices in which it transitions from one state into another over time. *Molten* is an exhibition that enables visitors to quite literally get to the heart of the matter that Martini uses in his artistic practice – physically and philosophically – reflecting on the moments when matter changes, and modifying our understanding of the material conditions we deal with each day. In particular, Martini's research looks at one specific type of matter – phenolic sand, an artificially composed kind of sand selected by the artist for its special properties, including the way in which it melts and binds with nearby pieces of the same material.

A coat of phenolic resin covers each grain, and this substance enables the material to expand and blend with other grains with the application of heat. Martini studied the properties of quartz sand and used this as a point of departure for his investigation; heating, moulding, moving and shaping the matter to simultaneously explore its nature and generate pieces that, throughout the show, constitute the vocabulary for a new language he aims to develop to help communicate his practice. Navigating *Molten*, one can easily see in which way Martini's work is inspired by the complex and articulated philosophical structure of Maurizio Ferraris's "new realism."<sup>1</sup> Each sculpture reflects his philosophical and material understanding of another realm of perception. Exploring this "new" realm, Martini de-materialises the consistency of the matter he uses, exploiting its chemical properties and deconstructing

the forms it is typically used for. In this operation of de-structuralisation, Martini's artistic practice echoes Graham Harman's materialism.<sup>2</sup> By embracing an object-oriented philosophical approach in his practice, he sheds new light on the nature of materialism.

*Molten* unfolds Martini's research into space and time, creating an area in which he reconnects with matter in a more thoughtful and profound way. Because the exhibition focuses on how the modification of a phenolic-coated quartz sand might change how we approach and understand the world, it is conceived as part of a larger meta-reflection on the Anthropocene. Mastering the melting process has transformed the way in which mankind approaches and shapes the world. The moment when communities around the world learned to heat, melt and mould metals marks, in many respects, the beginning of technology, a historical juncture when mankind investigated a new way to manipulate nature and the mechanisms regulating it.

The exhibition also contains a performative component. Over two months, Martini initiates the metamorphosis of the space, assuming the role of a contemporary Prometheus. Throughout the show, the artist heats up portions of the sand, moulding shapes and forms that he randomly places in the space, designing a casual labyrinth of vertical and horizontal primordial forms. The title of the show, *Molten*, is an archaic Middle English form of the past participle of "melt", which the artist adopts to refer to the archaic, primordial gesture of melting metal as an operation that points to the beginning of technology. The moment in which quartz sand turns from a solid into a liquid state of an undefined shape is one that is suspended in time, and anticipates change and a possible new understanding of reality. Martini understands fusion as a potential moment in time for matter to enter a cycle of regeneration rather than entropy, and this approach is crucial to his artistic reading of the Anthropocene. The installation, hosted in the underground room, becomes a large, elastic vessel in which the essence of an intellectual principle (in this case, matter materialised in the form of quartz sand) exists at different stages and in different shapes, signifying the different stages of existence and conveying new levels of sensorial and intellectual experience.

In his previous works, Martini has employed the same matter, but concentrated it within determined forms, such as rectangular parallelepipeds and spheres, to be more

in control of his own space of action. With *Molten*, the artist frees the working material from all constraints, enabling it to occupy the whole exhibition space and exist without a specific form for a short time. The audience enters, tangibly experiencing both the raw material on a microscopic level and its melted versions in forms on a macroscopic level. Martini conceives the installation as a space of experience in which the audience perceives moments of proximity to these micro and macro components simultaneously.

Now that the Earth's ice caps are quite literally melting due to rises in temperature caused by man's interactions with the planet (the Anthropocene), the title of the exhibition, *Molten*, has additional connotations. "Molten" refers to the slow but continuous movement of matter that exists in neither a liquid nor a solid state. The term indicates the fraction of time within which matter switches from one condition to another one. "Molten" is also a term that reflects the "metaphorical cage" in which matter holds two stages: the before and the after, the solid and the liquid. This passage of matter through different stages is what scholar Timothy Morton addresses as the "sheer viscosity of objects."<sup>3</sup> In his renowned book *The Ecological Thought*,<sup>4</sup> Morton uses the term "viscosity" to describe "hyperobjects," i.e. concepts and objects that are so widely distributed across space and time they transcend spatiotemporal specificity, like global warming or radioactive plutonium. Additionally, the attachment of the resin to the sand has interesting connotations. For example, the notion of "being attached" is a gesture through which the resin holds on to the sand. Broadly speaking, the resin also contributes to the responsivity of that certain consistency of the sand.

At the conclusion of the exhibition, the intervention of the artist serves as a microcosmic metaphor of the modifications that mankind has made to the structure of planet Earth. The colours of the landscape will significantly determine the conformation of the space: the lighter, multi-coloured sand will highlight areas where the artist has not intervened, and the darker areas will mark the places where Martini has heated the matter and turned it into a solid form. The artist unpacks the constitutive matter of his work and transforms the exhibition space into a laboratory in which the microscopic phenomena that are the typical protagonists of the fusion of the phenolic resin are observed macroscopically through the lens of the exhibition.

The installation becomes a field of experimentation and paradoxes, where micro and macro aspects of life intertwine, creating a space of reflection that explores the viscosity of a specific matter – quartz sand – and the interstices in time in which it changes its status, consistency and, thus, function.

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<sup>1</sup> Maurizio Ferraris, *Introduction to New Realism*, trans. Sarah de Sanctis (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minnesota: University Of Minnesota Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2010).