



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

ENCOUNTERING WORLDS: PERFORMING IN/AS PHILOSOPHY IN THE ECOLOGICAL AGE

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Performance is an inclusive term.

Richard Schechner (2003: xvii)

By their performances shall ye know them.

Victor Turner
(quoted in Schechner and Appel 1990, 1)

In what way or ways can performance respond to the current ecological challenges? Is it possible for performance to contribute to the contemporary philosophical debates that have been seeking to trouble the certainty of the ontological divide between 'Nature' and 'Culture'? If it can, can it do so without once again reiterating the human as both maker and ultimate arbiter of all knowledges, the lead player—protagonist, soloist, artist, 'genius'—from which a master performance is expected, that of turning doubt and uncertainty into authoritative certitude? Those are the questions that have lead us here.

At a time of deep ecological uncertainties, categories such as 'Nature' and 'Culture' and the ontological rift between humans and nonhumans are being challenged by scholars across the disciplines. For over twenty years now, researchers have been trying to think the world beyond human privilege and mastery. From the posthuman feminisms of Donna Haraway (1991), N.

Katherine Hayles (2005) and Rosi Braidotti (2013) to the vitalism of Manuel DeLanda (2006) and Jane Bennett (2010); from the Actor-Network Theory of Bruno Latour (1981) to the “agential realism” of Karen Barad (2007) or the speculative realist moves of Quentin Meillassoux (2009) or Graham Harman (2010a), recent philosophical thought has tried, once again, to address the real despite the human, by daring to think a world—the ecological world—in which humans are either no longer present or, at least, not in full control. One could fairly say that all those authors, despite the many differences that often separate them and fuel their passionate disagreements, share a common interest in undoing the categories of ‘Nature’ and ‘Culture’ through a troubling of the certainty of the modern divide between humans and nonhumans, where the latter were understood to constitute ‘Nature’ as a resource pool to be used as fuel for the ‘Culture’ of the former (Kant 2009, 24; Latour 1993, 8).

Such work has recently been given further legitimacy thanks to the work of Dutch chemist Paul Crutzen who, writing in *Nature* in 2002, proposed to assign the term ‘Anthropocene’ to “the present, in many ways human-dominated, geological epoch, supplementing the Holocene—the warm period of the past 10–12 millennia” (Crutzen 2002, 23). According to data quoted by Crutzen, since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution in Britain in the late eighteenth century, the human population has increased tenfold to six billion, being expected to reach ten billion by the end of the 21st century. Driven by changes in human dietary habits brought about by industrialised food supply chains, the cattle population has risen to 1.4 billion and industrial fishing has removed between 25% and 35% of the ocean fish population. At the same time, 30% to 50% of the planet’s land surface is being exploited by humans. Whilst dams and river diversions have been made possible thanks to the development of engineering, tropical forests are disappearing and more than half of all accessible fresh water is used by humans. Energy consumption has increased 16-fold during the 20th century, leading to the emission of 160 million tonnes of atmospheric sulphur dioxide per year—more than twice the sum of its natural emissions—while the agriculture industry produces more nitrogen for fertilisers than the amount that is able to be processed by all terrestrial ecosystems. Added to that, fossil-fuel burning and agriculture have caused substantial increases in the concentration of greenhouse gases—carbon dioxide by 30% and methane by more than 100%, reaching their highest levels of the past 400 millennia. As a consequence of all these effects, caused so far by only 25% of the world population, the planet’s climate is changing dramatically and faster than it has ever done in the previous 12 millennia of the Holocene (Crutzen 2002, 23).

Crutzen’s thesis, with its highlighting of the ways in which human activity has affected terrestrial ecosystems and planetary geological formations, confirms what some scholars have been arguing for the best part of 20 years; namely, that the separation between ‘Nature’ and ‘Culture’ is anything but clear or even certain. That being the case, how might the realisation of this idea affect performance and its theory? Is it possible to speculate as to what performance might mean, on how differently it might or might not look on the flattened ontological grounds of the Anthropocene? Can current and future understandings of what it means to perform respond to the collapse of the wall often thought to separate humans from nonhumans? If so, what could be the consequences—epistemological, ethical, political, etc.—of rethinking, reenacting, reconfiguring and reshaping performance and its theories in light of the challenges of the ecological crisis?

Theories of theatre and performance have, at least since Ancient Greece, been predominantly focused on various forms of human social and cultural production. From Plato's rejection of mimesis to its recovery as a didactic tool at the hands of Aristotle; from Brecht's political writing on theatre to the field-defining works of scholars such as Richard Schechner and Peggy Phelan, performance has been mostly thought as something whose existence depends on the presence of human bodies, whether as performers or as audiences. As Nicholas Ridout noted, "[the] theatre [...] is all about humans coming face to face with other humans [...]" (Ridout 2006, 97). It is there, in that space of self-recognition, that theatre and performance are able to trigger a reflection on one's own human condition; it is there where they become what Alan Read termed "the human laboratory" (Read 2009, 2–5). Still, what both the ecological crisis and the recent resurgence of materialist and realist metaphysical projects appear to show is that any attempts at isolating humans from nonhumans and making the latter dependent on the former are, at best, wishful human thinking and are, at worst, the kind of rhetoric fuelling the destruction of the Earth's ecosystems. In the Anthropocene, when humans rediscover themselves always-already enmeshed in promiscuous relationships with nonhumans—in such a way that it might no longer make sense to keep them apart in knowledge formations—how can performance be said equally of both sides of the old divide between 'Nature' and 'Culture'? Is it possible to theorise what Read called "performance as such" (Read 2009, 82)?

In order to address those questions, we will depart from Richard Bauman's definition of performance as poetic communication and, through an engagement with the notions of both communication and *poiēsis*, investigate ways in which performance might be said to occur beyond the human. In doing so, we will also be highlighting how performance and *theatron* are two crucial concepts for both understanding and expanding the aesthetic dimension of causation as thought by the philosophers associated with the Speculative Realist movement known as Object-Oriented Ontology.

Performance as Communication

In the introduction to his book *Story, Performance, and Event*, anthropologist Richard Bauman wrote the following:

Briefly stated, I understand performance as a mode of communication, a way of speaking, the essence of which resides in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill, highlighting the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content. [...] Viewed in these terms, performance may be understood as the enactment of the poetic function, the essence of spoken artistry. (Bauman 1986, 3)

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, to "communicate" means "to make [something] known, [...] to exchange information," whereas "communications" has a slightly different meaning, standing not for an action but for the series of apparatuses associated with technology in advanced

information societies, from traditional roads to information highways such as telephones, radios, and computers.

Following the General Definition of Information (GDI), information (namely, that which is exchanged in communication), must comply with three conditions in order to be classified as such:

- GDI) σ is an instance of information, understood as semantic content, if and only if:
- GDI.1) σ consists of n data, for $n \geq 1$;
- GDI.2) the data are *well formed* [i.e., they follow the rules of syntax shared by the emitter and the receptor of information];
- GDI.3) the well-formed data are *meaningful* [i.e., their semantic content is able to be deciphered]. (Floridi 2010, 21)

From that general definition, it is possible to infer that to communicate, or to exchange information, is not the privilege of humans. All kinds of bodies exchange well-formed information with one another and, in that sense, communicate: plants and animals, for instance, have developed very efficient forms of communication. Famous examples of such behaviours include the case of the male *Scenopoetes dentiostriis*, a bird known for building extremely sophisticated and colourful structures that are then read as reproductive value by prospective female partners: an idiosyncratic characteristic that made the bird take centre stage in the philosophical discourse of Deleuze and Guattari, who called it a “complete artist” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 184). Or we might also cite the case of some species of flowers such as the orchids belonging to the genera *Ophrys* and *Cryptostylis*, predominant in Eurasia, South America, and Australia, that mimic female insects in order to be pollinated by the males who, fooled by delusion, pseudocopulate with them (Dafni 1984).

Viruses, too, depend on communication for successful replication: copies of the HIV virus, for instance, exchange information in the form of RNA with their host CD4 cells, information that is then transcribed into DNA and transported to the nucleus of the host cells, where it is added to the latter’s own genetic material, leading to the replication of the virus (Barré-Sinoussi et al 2013, 879).

Another quite timely example of communication amongst non-animal bodies is the circulation of information in financial systems: networks through which value circulates and which, despite having been created by humans, can be said to have acquired an agency of their own thanks to the adoption of high-frequency algorithmic trading, much to the despair of the people affected by today’s crumbling economies. As Geoffrey Rogow wrote in the Wall Street Journal blog *MarketBeat*:

The majority of stock trades now originate with fully automated “high frequency” funds [...that] employ no traders in the conventional sense. They employ no economists or chart trackers. Rather, programmers [...] outfit computers with strategies based on obscure mathematical correlations. Then the machines trade in and out of stocks at light speed without human intervention, a departure from the “fundamental” investing model that dominated trading for the last century. (Rogow 2009)

In information systems like contemporary financial markets, what is left for humans is the role of analyst, observer, or what we might also describe as 'audience member'. Capitalism has become an autonomous machine, a network through which flows of information circulate in the form of capital and are received and processed not only by finance analysts and high street and online shoppers but also, at a time when thousands of financial operations are executed automatically every second without the intervention of human agents, by other nonhuman nodes of the machine (Steiner 2012).

All the above examples comply with the General Definition of Information: well-formed data (GDI.2) is produced as RNA, stock market indexes, colourful architecture made of leaves and found materials, or patterns and shapes of flowers. That coherent data is then read and converted into meaning (GDI.3) as instructions for producing a certain kind of viral protein, as financial tendencies and 'moods' of the markets, as indexes of reproductive value, or as female insects willing to copulate.

Notwithstanding the above, it is possible to argue that not all instances of communication are performance in the poietic sense attributed to it by Richard Bauman. As was made clear by J.L. Austin's separation of 'performative' from 'constative' utterances, not all utterances do things or are able to bring forth worlds; some merely describe realities that had already been enacted beforehand (Austin 1962, 5). In other words, and in line with Bauman's definition quoted above, not all communication is an "enactment of the poetic function" and, therefore, performance. Saying "the sky is blue" does not colour the sky in the way that the "I do" of wedding vows enacts the act of marriage. For an exchange of information to become performance it must function differently and be responsible not for describing *a priori* bodies but for, somehow, enacting or actualising them as phenomena. In short, for performance to take place as effective creation or transformation, the body that is given to experience through it—regardless of its perceived nature—must be understood as an event, that is, as something that is brought forth as tangible reality every time it is encountered. As such, in order to clarify the ways in which that happens, we will now depart from the concept of 'object' and, supported by the postulates of Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology, investigate how it might relate to communication and the "poetic function" that characterises Bauman's definition of performance.

To assert the relevance of performance theory for the study of all kinds of bodies is by no means a new move in Performance Studies, even despite the discipline's more usual concern with *human* time-based, body-based art forms and social rituals. Richard Schechner, for one, has made a similar claim in the foreword to the book *Teaching Performance Studies*:

In performance studies, texts, architecture, visual arts, or any other item or artifact of art or culture are not studied as such. When texts, architecture, visual arts, or anything else are looked at by performance studies, they are studied "as" performances. That is, they are regarded as practices, events, and behaviors, not as "objects" or "things." (Schechner 2002, x)

Such a privileging of the eventness and performance-like character of “objects” and “things”—that is, nonhuman, nonliving bodies—can be more clearly understood by looking at the ways in which “object” has been used in philosophy. At one point in his book *A Hegel Dictionary*, for instance, Michael Inwood traces the history of the concept of object from its origin in the Latin *objectum* (past participle of *objicere*, “to throw before or over against”) to its use in Hegelian philosophy. According to Inwood, *Objekt* was given the sense of “something thrown before, or over against, the mind” for the first time in the 18th century by German philosopher Christian Wolff, despite the fact that the German language also had a native word for object, *Gegenstand*, “what stands over against” (Inwood 1992, 203). Later, both words appeared in Hegel’s work but each with its own meaning: whilst *Gegenstand* stood, in Hegel, for an intentional object, i.e. an object as it is given in experience, *Objekt* stood for an object which is, at least initially, independent from one’s experience of it (204).

In their etymology, both the Latin and the German words for object, *objectum* and *Gegenstand*, already implied some level of performance as that which allows something to be qualified as an object—the performance of having it thrown against the mind, of having it *presented* or introduced into the space of one’s experience. Presentation should, here, be understood, as philosopher of science Robert Crease has put it, as “that dimension of performance which aims at achieving the presence of a phenomenon under one of its profiles” (Crease 1993, 103). In other words, through presentation, performance creates a *theatron*, the space of theatre that both separates and co-implies bodies that spectate and bodies that are spectated. Within such spaces, what are spectated or perceived by the mind are phenomena: informational translations of the spectated bodies.

A useful way of understanding such a *theatron* that performance opens up can be found in the recent metaphysical work of philosophers associated with the movement known as Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO).

OOO is a philosophical system initially developed by Graham Harman and later expanded by several other thinkers, most notably Levi Bryant (2011), Ian Bogost (2012), and Timothy Morton (2011; 2013). As a branch of what came to be broadly known as Speculative Realism (SR), OOO shares with other philosophical projects an investment in thinking the real beyond the “correlationism” of thought and world that Quentin Meillassoux identified as a feature of post-Kantian philosophy. In Meillassoux’s words:

[The] central notion of modern philosophy since Kant seems to be that of *correlation*. By ‘correlation’ we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other [...].

Thus one could say that up until Kant, one of the principal problems of philosophy was to think substance, while ever since Kant, it has consisted in trying to think the correlation. [...] The question is no longer ‘which is the proper substrate?’ but ‘which is the proper correlate?’ (Meillassoux 2009, 5–6)

The problem with correlationism is that whilst most post-Kantian philosophy appeared to privilege epistemology to the detriment of ontology—from Kant’s assertion of the limits of knowledge to

what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick called the “hermeneutics of suspicion” found in the critical work of queer theory (Sedgwick 2003, 124), the world was starting to feel the consequences of several decades of unrestrained human exploitation of the planet’s resources. Thus, as Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman noted in the preface to their edited volume *The Speculative Turn*:

The works collected here are a speculative wager on the possible returns from a renewed attention to reality itself. In the face of the ecological crisis, the forward march of neuroscience, the increasingly splintered interpretations of basic physics, and the ongoing breach of the divide between human and machine, there is a growing sense that previous philosophies are incapable of confronting these events. (Harman et al 2011, 3)

It was as an alternative to established paradigms of thought which, as Bruno Latour noted, had artificially split reality into three separate and impermeable sets—facts, discourse, and power—which, in turn, became the independent domains of study of Science, Philosophy, and Politics (Latour 1993, 6), that Speculative Realism constituted itself.

However, despite sharing SR’s concerns with the real and rejection of correlationism, OOO has its own particular set of premises and postulates which have, in recent years, become extremely popular not only amongst a young generation of philosophers and theorists, but also amidst artists and scientists, perhaps due to the ways in which it calls for a reengagement with the real and its “thingness,” the established object of study of the sciences and the age-old raw material of the arts.

In line with new techno-scientific developments, Harman inaugurated OOO by departing from Heidegger’s tool-analysis and Husserl’s work on intentionality in an attempt to bring the nonhuman world once again to the centre of philosophical debates. As he wrote:

Philosophy has gradually renounced its claim to have anything to do with the world itself. Fixated on the perilous leap between subject and object, it tells us nothing about the chasm that separates tree from root or ligament from bone. Forfeiting all comment on the realm of objects, it sets itself up as master of a single gap between self and world, where it holds court with a never-ending sequence of paradoxes, accusations, counter-charges, partisan gangs, excommunications, and alleged renaissances. (Harman 2010a, 94)¹

Against such philosophical fixations on the “leap between subject and object, Harman went back to works by Heidegger and Husserl and expanded them with the help of thinkers as diverse as French and Islamic occasionalist philosophers (Malebranche, al-Ash’ari, and al-Ghazali), Ortega y Gasset, Xavier Zubiri, Manuel DeLanda, and Bruno Latour.

The basic claim of OOO is a rather simple one: everything that there is is an “object.” Humans, trees, ideas, dreams, unicorns, lights, stock markets, viruses or capital, they are all “objects” in the selfsame sense. By “object,” Harman means any reality that is irreducible to its parts and that, because it always exceeds its givenness in experience, cannot be exhausted by its relations with other entities, therefore possessing autonomy and interiority (Harman 2009a, 187–8). In short,

“object” means “a real thing apart from all foreign relations with the world, and apart from all domestic relations with its own pieces” (188).

“Objects” are irreducible to relations because, like the tools in Heidegger’s analysis, the primary relationship one establishes with them lies not in knowing, but *using* them. In other words, what characterises Harman’s “objects” is that they are first and foremost ‘ready-to-hand’, rather than present-at-hand (Harman 2010a, 96). By that, Harman means that, after Heidegger, for tools to perform as expected, their presence must somehow be concealed from view; their reality must, as it were, become invisible, unnoticed or independent from one’s access to it. It is only when tools break down that they are able to reveal themselves or, as Harman writes, “[for] Heidegger, it is generally when equipment is *lacking* in some way that it emerges from its shadowy underground of pure competence and reveals its contours to view” (97). A computer is a great example of this: when it performs at its best or as expected, the computer itself disappears behind its smooth performance; one does not notice the screen but is, instead, able to direct one’s gaze beyond it, to whatever is projected there. It is only when the computer crashes and freezes that it reappears as itself and no longer as an invisible window into a particular informational landscape.

Still, Harman’s most crucial gesture is not one of reinforcing Heidegger’s tool-analysis but, rather, of extending its logic beyond the human uses of nonhuman tools. With Harman, the ready-to-hand character of the Heideggerian tool-being is extended to all kinds of bodies so that readiness-to-hand becomes the first general postulate of his flat ontology. In his words:

[What] is of most interest is not the content of Heidegger’s self-understanding, but the unforeseen direction in which contemporary ontology is forced to travel as a result of his tool-analysis. [...] His insight into tool-being is a discovery that belongs to the ages, and is arguably the pivot point of twentieth century philosophy. [...] Heidegger’s tool analysis should not be read as a limited account of human productive or technical activity. Instead, it turns out that with the theory of equipment Heidegger gives us an insight of overwhelming scope, one that cannot be restricted to “tools” in the narrow sense of the term, and ultimately cannot even be restricted to the sphere of human life. The discussion of tool-being provides us with nothing less than a metaphysics of reality [...]. (Harman 2010a, 46)

In this passage Harman suggests that, through expanding Heidegger’s tool-analysis to all bodies—or as he calls them, to all “objects”—one reaches the first principle of his Object-Oriented Ontology; namely, that the being of all “objects” lies somewhere outside the relations they establish with other “objects.” In other words, that all “objects withdraw from relations” whether or not such relations involve humans or their nonhuman tools (Harman 2007, 193).

In doing so—that is, by claiming that all bodies exist on the same ontological footing, that everything (from dreams to furniture, unicorns to supernovas) is *equally* an “object” and has reality to it—Harman was able to overcome the Kantian thought-world correlate by positing the real as *a priori* to thought. Nevertheless, by then claiming that “objects” cannot enter into relations, that they never make direct contact with one another, Harman still maintained a quasi-Kantian notion of epistemic finitude: if “objects” can never encounter one another, they can never grasp each other

either. Therefore, instead of rejecting finitude, what Harman did was to strip it from its human exclusivity and extend it to all "objects" as their inability to fully grasp one another.

Still, a question arises from such an ontological claim: if indeed bodies or "objects" are always kept apart, always somehow withdrawn from the encounters in which they are supposed to be involved, how is it that they can still manage to affect one another? How is causation still possible? The answer, according to Harman, is that "objects" relate to one another by proxy, through the mediating role of what he calls "sensual objects," after Husserl (Harman 2007, 192–7). Whilst "real objects" are autonomous from relations, their being or essence never fully exhausted, "sensual objects" are given in the phenomenal realm and are contingent on each particular encounter. As he puts it:

Phenomenology cannot speak of how one object breaks or burns another, since this would deliver the world to the power of scientific explanation, which employs nothing but naturalistic theories. For Husserl, the only rigorous method is to describe how the world is given to consciousness prior to such theories. Philosophy becomes the study of phenomena, not real objects. But phenomena are objects nonetheless: in a new, ideal sense. For what we experience in perception is not disembodied qualities, as the empiricists hold; instead, we encounter a world broken up into chunks. [...] Note already that [Husserl's] sensual objects have a different fate from real ones. Whereas real zebras and lighthouses withdraw from direct access, their sensual counterparts do not withdraw in the least. (194)

In order to illustrate that point, one could take the university building as an example. According to Harman's perspective, when one crosses its doors and walks along its corridors, attends lectures and seminars or even thinks about it, the reality of the building is always 'more' than the way it is experienced at any given moment. It is also always in excess of the sum of everybody's perceptions of it at any given time. That is because the university, as a case of a "real object", always withdraws from relations. Therefore, what one experiences at any given time (when entering it or even thinking about it) is a third entity that acts as the proxy in that relation: the phenomenal or "sensual" translation of the "real object" that the university is. Consequently, Harman's view suggests that, whilst a new "sensual" university is created in every encounter only to disappear as soon as that encounter comes to an end, the "real" university, on the other hand, would remain unperturbed even if everybody suddenly fell asleep, or if the whole world but the university itself collapsed and relations of any kind, therefore, became impossible.

As a result, relationality, as conceived by Harman, opens up a *theatron* where, for the duration of the encounter, bodies meet to witness one another. In such a *theatron*, bodies never witness each other in full but, instead, are only able to encounter the contingent mediating roles they perform to one another.

The notion of translation is also of great importance in this regard. Not only is translation a particular kind of mediated form of communication, but it has also been used by Harman himself to describe the transformative process through which his "sensual objects" come into being and take up their mediating role (Harman 2009a; 2009b). Translation has also been used by

performance theorists who have hinted at a similar process when describing the poietic nature of performance encounters. At the beginning of *Between Theater and Anthropology*, for instance, Richard Schechner described a performance of the deer dance of the Arizona Yaqui as follows:

At the moments when the dancer is “not himself” and yet “not not himself,” his own identity, and that of the deer, is locatable only in the liminal areas of “characterization,” “representation,” “imitation,” “transportation,” and “transformation” [...]. All of these words say that performers can’t really say who they are. (Schechner 1985, 4)

Another reference to processes of translation and their relations to performance practice can be found in the following excerpt from Peggy Phelan’s *Unmarked*:

In performance, the body is metonymic of self, of character, of voice, of “presence.” But in the plenitude of its apparent visibility and availability, the performer actually disappears and represents something else—dance, movement, sound, character, “art.” [...] Performance uses the performer’s body to pose a question about the inability to secure the relation between subjectivity and the body *per se*; performance uses the body to frame the lack of Being promised by and through the body—that which cannot appear without a supplement. (Phelan 1993, 151)

Following the postulates of OOO, and in resonance with existing work done by performance theorists, performance is not merely another name for communication or exchange of information. Instead, performance is an instance of the latter in which a body is translated into—and therefore enacted in—the phenomenal realm as a tangible but always incomplete version of itself. “Performance,” as Roger Scruton wrote in *Aesthetics of Music*, “is the art of translating” (Scruton 1999, 441). In other words, performance takes place every time a body, human or nonhuman, is able to encounter another body by playing a role or a function. Performance is, therefore, what allows bodies to encounter one another and become visible as *personae* in the space of the *theatron*, even if such *personae* will always remain ephemeral and contingent on each particular encounter.

To sum up, and as illustrated by Fig. 1 below, when two bodies (Performing Bodies ψ and ω in the diagram) encounter one another, they never really overcome the distance separating them: a distance that constitutes the *theatron* where bodies ψ and ω face each other. Therefore, when encountering one another, neither of the two bodies is able to witness the other in full. Instead, what each of the two experiences is an encounter with an ephemeral translation of its counterpart, i.e. with the contingent role performed by the latter in that particular encounter (performed *personae* ψ' and ω' in the diagram). As the diagram hopefully makes clear, the being of a performing body is always more than—and therefore, never exhausted by—any of the phenomenal bodies or roles it might perform at any given instance.

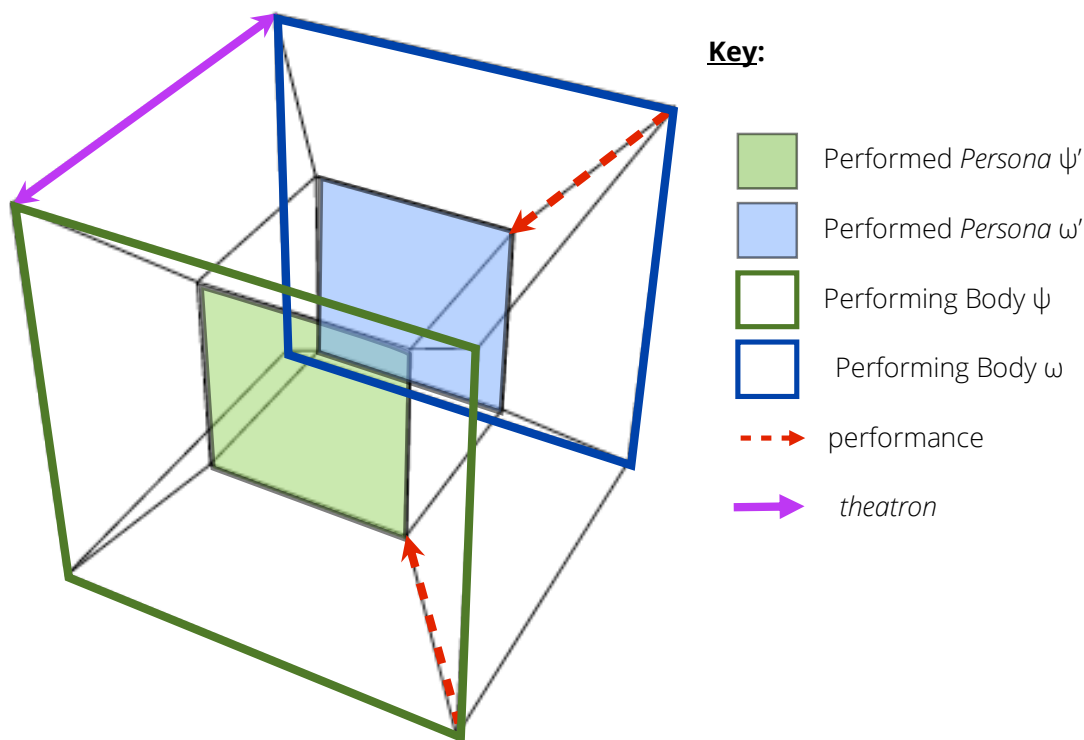


Fig. 1: Diagram of a performance encounter.

Notwithstanding the above, claiming that a stone standing on top of an iced lake or a computer responding to a certain pattern of electrical impulses belong to the same *kind* of encounters one experiences in black boxes or white cubes, is not the same as claiming that the bodies involved in them are encountered in the same *way*. Stating that all relations between all kinds of bodies are instances of performance is not the same as arguing that a tree trunk encounters an axe in the same way that a human encounters Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. In order to explore the ways in which those different types of encounter, although of the same *kind*, can still be said to differ in *degree*, the following section will take up the notion of 'allure' as it appears in Harman's work and reframe it theatrically by measuring it against the *Verfremdung* enacted in Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre.

Encountering Strangers

Although, as it was argued in the previous section, all encounters between all kinds of bodies are poetic and, therefore, performative in the sense that they all enact or bring forth something that was not present, not all performances provide the same *degree* of access to the body of the performer. Even if all occasions of performance are equally responsible for enacting worlds, sometimes the knowledge they convey of the bodies involved in them is of a totally different kind. At those times, performance is hyperbolised and reveals itself as such, therefore foregrounding the *theatron* on which it takes place. In doing so, and as it will now be shown, it is able to highlight

the inaccessible core of a body and point in its direction as if pointing towards its own horizon. Those are occasions of what we know as estrangement.

To start understanding what we mean by hyperbolised performance, it is useful to look at the dialogue between Socrates and Diotima of Mantinea in Plato's *Symposium*. After having initially told Socrates that all occasions when something comes into being are occasions of poetry and thus craftsmen are themselves poets, Diotima goes on to add the following caveat:

Nevertheless [...], as you also know, these craftsmen are not called poets. We have other words for them, and out of the whole of poetry we have marked off one part, the part the Muses give us with melody and rhythm, and we refer to this by the word that means the whole. For this alone is called 'poetry,' and those who practice this part of poetry are called poets. (Plato 1997, 488)

How, then, does this special kind of poetry or *poiēsis* differ from the other ones? How different is it from the translations of bodies into phenomenal *personae* with which this essay has been concerned heretofore? What is it that this particular type of poetry brings forth or makes present that is so valuable?

In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger claimed that the work of art has to do with *alētheia* (ἀλήθεια), the "unconcealment of beings" (Heidegger 2002, 16). As such, he continued, it "is not concerned with the reproduction of a particular being that has at some time been actually present. Rather, it is concerned to reproduce the general essence of things (16). As a result, if performance is about bodies role-playing with one another whilst never being exhausted by the roles they play, then the poietic events Diotima of Mantinea associates with inspiration from the muses and Heidegger with the work of art, are instances of a particular type of performance: one that enables a closer level of contact between the bodies involved in them, revealing something about the latter that had not been contained in any of their phenomenal manifestations. In short, and to paraphrase Heidegger, in those performances bodies appear somehow unconcealed.

Harman makes a similar claim with the introduction of his concept of "allure," which he uses to name the moment in which the withdrawn presence of a "real object" is highlighted (Harman 2007, 211–221). Allure, which Harman claims to be a feature of aesthetic experience and humour (amongst other things), is what happens when the tension between "sensual qualities" and the "real object" hiding behind them somehow disintegrates, thus allowing for the "object" to reveal itself as withdrawn, like a barely perceptible light that suddenly starts flickering in the dark and from a distance (Harman 2010b, 118–119). According to Harman, allure does not reveal the "real object" because, as it was already discussed above, "real objects" withdraw from relations. Instead, the "real object" is alluded to despite remaining inaccessible; it is unveiled as having a core that exceeds any of its *personae*. Harman's allure, therefore, is a kind of knowledge formed not through direct contact—like the contact made when a body encounters another body's *persona*—but produced through the sudden realisation that a previously familiar body is ultimately a stranger.

Thus, when performance is highlighted as such, bodies are able to emerge as strangers from behind the roles they play in the contingency of each encounter. Despite their inability to fully reveal themselves to one another, such an experience of estrangement has the ability to foreground their alien, hidden core. If performance is the way through which bodies translate themselves to one another, estrangement is what happens when bodies suddenly flicker from behind the contingency of their imperfect translations. In order for that to happen, performance needs to be hyperbolised so much that it turns opaque and becomes visible as such, therefore foregrounding the theatrical space of the encounter which, to paraphrase Harman, “is both nearness and distance” (Harman 2009a, 218). Because, when it takes place, performance highlights the theatrical cleavage between *persona* and witness, estrangement can be seen as an expansion of the Brechtian *Verfremdung* onto the wider *theatron* of the world, beyond the ‘Nature’/‘Culture’ divide. For, as Walter Benjamin wrote of Brecht’s epic theatre:

The task of epic theatre, Brecht believes, is not so much to develop actions as to represent conditions. But ‘represent’ does not here signify ‘reproduce’ in the sense used by the theoreticians of Naturalism. Rather, the first point at issue is to *uncover* those conditions. (One could just as well say: to *make them strange* [*ver fremden*].) This uncovering (making strange, or alienating) of conditions is brought about by processes being interrupted. (Benjamin 1998, 18)

Through its uncovering of the theatrical artifice of all encounters, estrangement reveals the alien core of bodies that would otherwise pass as familiar. As Fig. 2 shows, in those occasions of everyday performance that trigger nothing but recognition, bodies encounter one another only partially through the roles they play for one another: bodies ψ and ω in the diagram are only able to encounter each other’s performed *personae* ψ' and ω' . However, in instances of estrangement, the contingency of ephemerality of their *personae* is highlighted and bodies are revealed as being more than any of the roles they might play. Thus, in the diagram, bodies ψ and ω discover the existence of a differential between their bodies and the performed ways in which they appear to both themselves and one another. As a result of the foregrounding of that unsolvable differential, they become estranged. Indeed, perhaps most importantly, such occasions of estrangement do not only belong to the realm of an all too human “art”; they can also be found elsewhere beyond the human. They can be found in all occasions in which bodies, human or nonhuman, misperform to one another and, in doing so, are able to highlight the contingency of their roles, foreground the theatrical nature of their encounter, and bring forward the real bodies hiding behind their *personae*, with all their strangeness and surprises.

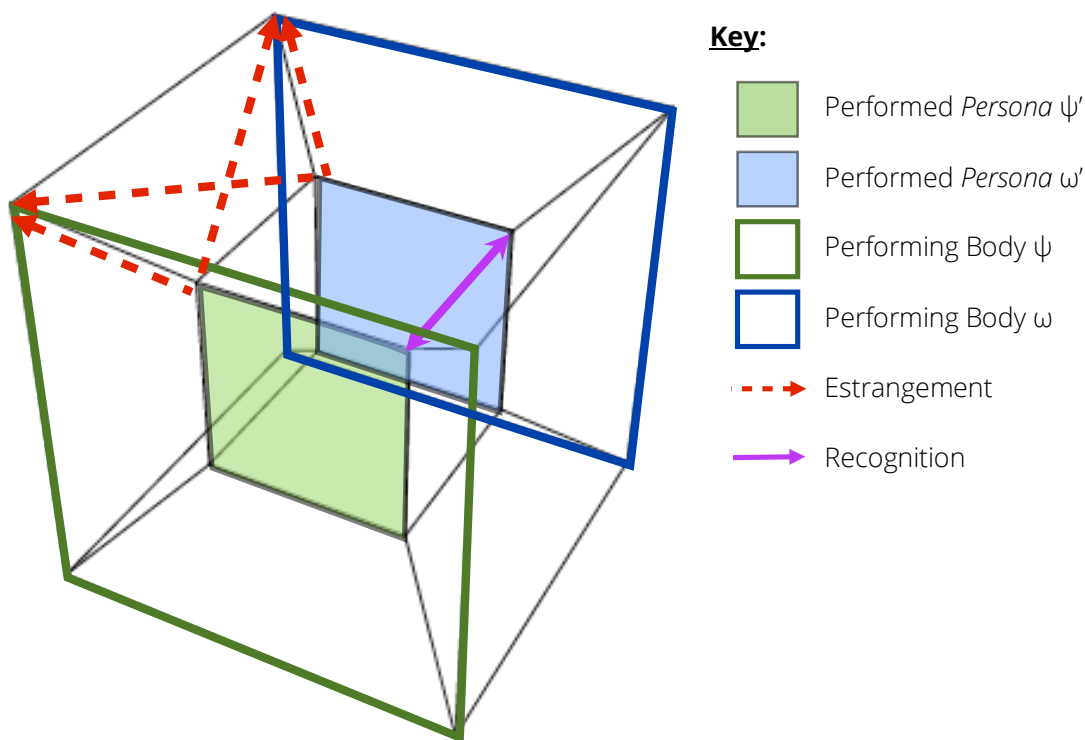


Fig. 2: Diagram of estrangement and recognition.

Conclusion

Today, as scientists announce the increasingly tight enmeshment of realities whose boundaries can no longer be safely told apart, the critical paradigms of scholarly work that had kept the human at the centre of the world have progressively started to be questioned: humans themselves are being accepted as slippery beings and their knowledge of the world approached as just one episode in a huge number of encounters that happen every day between all kinds of bodies. One could argue that the contemporary world, with all its cross-taxa entanglements and hybridisations has brought about the realisation that, despite all that has gone since Kant, humans can no longer pretend to occupy an exceptional position as rulers of the real. At a time marked by an increased awareness that the planet's ecosystems have reached a tipping point, traditional divisions of knowledge are begin put into question by the realisation that the boundaries that separate 'Nature' from 'Culture,' in being there, have become blurred and hard to pin down.

Still, despite their tight entanglement, bodies can never fully grasp, let alone master each other; relations reveal themselves as contingent negotiations, and the way in which bodies encounter one another as *relata* seems to always leave parts of those bodies untranslated, unreadable. If that were not the case, if bodies could be exhausted by their encounters, nothing of their being would survive the removal of the other bodies on whose encounter their existence had been predicated. And similarly, if bodies were to give themselves fully to one another in every encounter, no

surprises would ever happen, discoveries would not be made, disasters would be averted, and knowledge would have to always be absolute and, thus, stagnant.

Due to the rediscovery of the unavoidable enmeshment of bodies of which the Anthropocene is the latest symptom, and the foregrounding of the space that prevents bodies from fully mastering both themselves and one another, the world appears to have once again become *theatrum mundi*. On its stages, bodies encounter one another through the contingency of the *personae* they play, therefore making performance the process whereby body-parts are able to relate to one another and form new wholes whilst still being kept at a distance from each other—something akin to the neurons that communicate with one another despite the synapses that separate them. In this *theatron* of which theatre and performance are only parts, bodies are reiterated and emerge anew every time a performer meets an audience, every time something or someone acts, plays, or functions for something or someone else that watches, witnesses, or is otherwise involved in that encounter. In this *theatron* to which both recognition and surprise belong, performance is opened up as simultaneously *technē* and *poiēsis*, enactment and revelation. It emerges as both repetition and transformation, presence and mediation. Performance is communication and translation, information filtered out of noise within and beyond the confines of human cultural production. Performance is the way in which all bodies, human and nonhuman, play themselves to one another whilst always holding something back, like some bearer of divine secrets.

In such an ecological context, where the only thing all bodies appear to do is perform to one another, what methodologies are available for the scholar interested in somehow grasping those encounters? Can performance theory, a discipline already infamous for the perversity of its methods and objects of study, expand its broad spectrum in order to address the encounters between bodies beyond old certainties of 'Nature' and 'Culture'? What happens on the stages of the world once the human exits the scene—due to nuclear explosions, floods, epidemics, or just plain old self-obliteration? Can performance help us think that?

One of the questions that immediately follows the realisation that 1) performance is not limited to human cultural production, and 2) what is performed does not exhaust the bodies of the performers, is the question of how to highlight the theatrical space of all encounters and the inaccessible reality of the bodies involved in it. One solution to that problem, as we've seen, might pass through the catalysis of strange encounters. Bringing together Heidegger's thoughts on the origin of the work of art, Graham Harman's "allure," and the *Verfremdungseffekt* Brecht aimed to convey with his epic theatre, I have proposed strange encounters as particular instances of performance in which the theatrical distance between a body and the role it plays is revealed, making the body appear as a stranger, inexhaustible by the contingency of its performances.

If we claim that all encounters are performative because they enact worlds, and that sometimes performances break down and make otherwise familiar bodies become estranged, what we gain is not only a more expanded understanding of what it means to perform, but also a new framework for thinking community in the ecological age, beyond the contingencies of recognition and identity politics. That is because if performed roles are approached as being always ephemeral and unable

to exhaust the being of a body; if all bodies are addressed as ultimately foreign to one another, then lasting community formations need not depart from a selection of the attributes granting bodies the right to belong. Rather, they can constitute themselves from the realisation that communities can come about when bodies welcome one another as strangers.

If humans accept that they are members of a universe-wide, borderless, community of strangers, then the ethical debates that will follow will have to concern themselves with how best to approach one's neighbours regardless of their perceived nature, and no longer depend on judgements of whether a particular set of neighbours satisfies whichever conditions humans have found necessary for something or someone to be worthy of consideration. As a consequence, new forms of community where strangers are allowed to belong can fulfil the ecological needs from which this essay departed, for they will take as their principles the tight enmeshment of humans and nonhumans and their ability to affect and be affected by one another, whilst never forgetting that all bodies are irreplaceable and inexhaustible by any of the roles they might perform to one another.

Through the rediscovery or, at least, the re-embrace of the ecosystemic nature of the real that the above entails, performance was given a broader spectrum beyond the 'Nature'/'Culture' divide. What such a move aimed to achieve was the decoupling of performance from 'Culture,' allowing for the roles played by nonhumans in everyday encounters to become increasingly evident. Yet, in doing so, this essay does not represent an attack on the work that performance scholars have been doing since the inception of the discipline. Instead, its aim is to push even further one of the founding gestures of the field: the opening of performance theory to events taking place outside black boxes and white cubes. Such a gesture, in its willingness to think the parallels between what goes on inside the theatre and what takes place in wider social settings, can be said to have been the first attempt at understanding performance from an ecological viewpoint, a gesture that tried to look at the place of performance within the proverbial "bigger picture."

Through its broadening of performance into the realm of the nonhuman and its stressing of the dependence of performance on the *theatron*, this essay has also opened up a wider ecological approach to the study of human instances of cultural performance. For once "traditional" performance works—those we are used to see on stage—are approached as ecosystems (that is, as systems of relations between human and nonhuman bodies), then bodies on stage will be able to emerge as deeply enmeshed strangers oscillating between performing their expected roles and revealing their inaccessibility to one another.

For that reason, too, performance can become a very useful tool for making sense of the wider world in the Anthropocene, after the blurring of the divide between 'Nature' and 'Culture.' Because it ought not to be restricted to artistic, social, or even corporate spheres, performance can be a method guiding present and future thought, aiming to address both the place of humans in the broader ecosphere, as well as imagining a future in which all bodies, human and nonhuman, are cast equally as agents of the world. From philosophy to ecology, from computer science to speculative physics, performance could help clarify the ways in which bodies interact with one

another at both macro- and micro- levels of the real. As such, and in line with the promise of its broader than broad spectrum, perhaps the current ecological crisis does not merely mark the end of the world as it does signal the dawn of a new age, an age of performance.

Notes

¹ It is worth noting here that, despite Harman's and Meillassoux's sweeping characterisation of post-Kantian philosophy as being marked by what Harman called a "leap between subject and object," there are, nonetheless, major philosophical projects that cannot easily fit within such generalised description. Although occupying a rather singular place in the history of 20th-century philosophical thought, Deleuze and Guattari's transcendental materialism, for instance, with its assembling together of psychoanalysis, geology, physics, economics, political theory, and philosophy, is already marked by a similar attempt at troubling the subject-object dyad. As Ray Brassier noted in relation to Anti-Oedipus, "[underlying Deleuze and Guattari's] libidinal-materialist appropriation is the Deleuzian claim that, as far as the empirical realm is concerned, the business of a genuinely critical transcendentalism lies in articulating real conditions of ontological actuality rather than ideal conditions of epistemological possibility. Transcendental philosophy required the critique of representation rather than its legitimation. Thus, for Deleuze, the transcendental is not a substantive philosophical thesis affirming the subordination of objectivity to subjectivity, ontology to epistemology, but rather a polymorphic method wherein subjectivity and objectivity are suspended as equivocal, pre-philosophical categories and immanence becomes the operative functional criterion" (Brassier 2001, 54).

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Biography

João Florêncio is a lecturer in History of Modern and Contemporary Art and Visual Culture at the University of Exeter. His research navigates the intersections of visual culture, performance theory, philosophy and the eco-humanities in an attempt to reconsider the realm of the aesthetic vis-à-vis the ongoing ecological crisis and the metaphysical challenges raised therein.

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